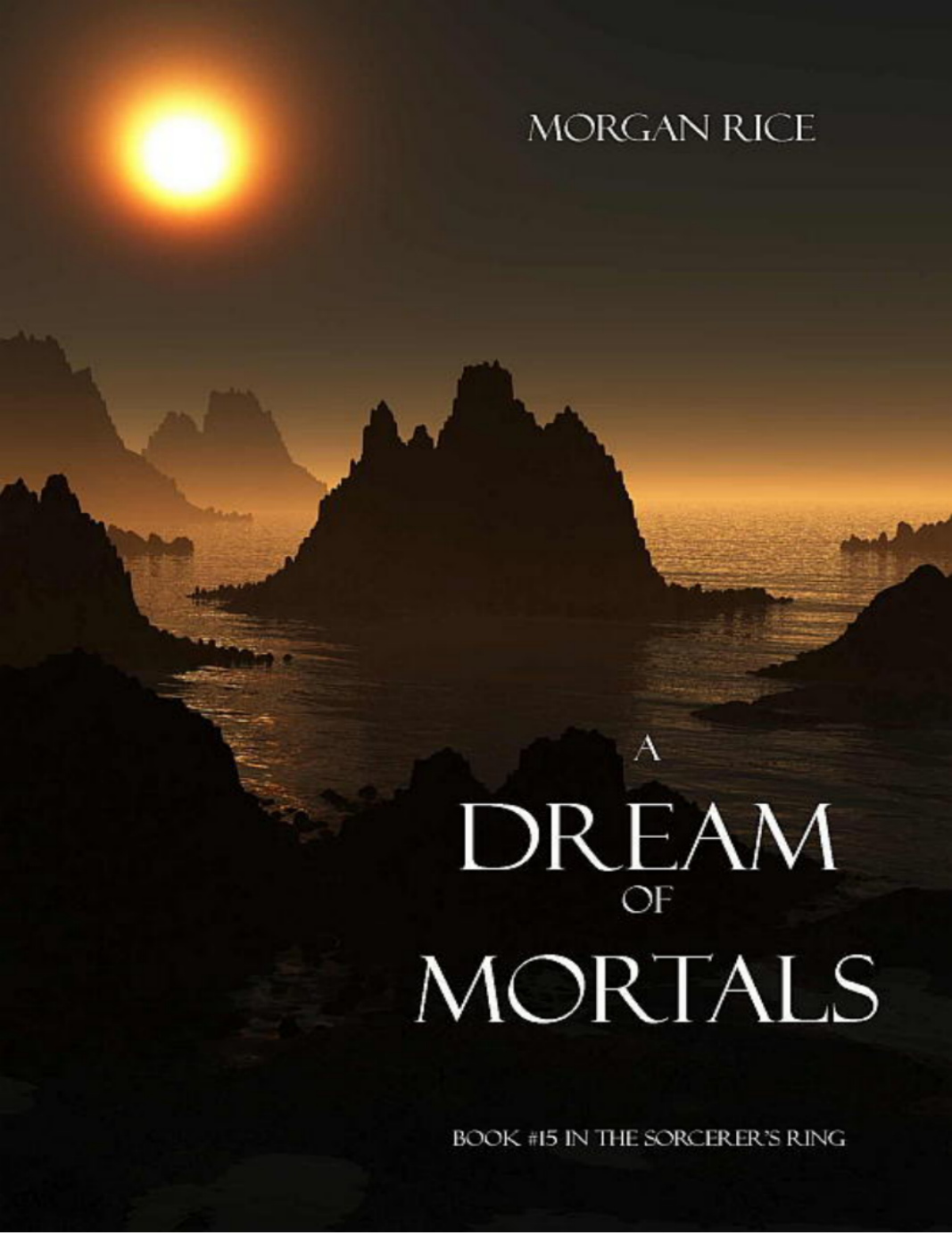
MORGAN RICE
A
DREAM
OF
MORTALS
BOOK #15 IN THE SORCERER'S RING

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

In A DREAM OF MORTALS, Thorgrin and his brothers struggle to break free from the grips of the pirates, and to continue their search for Guwayne at sea. As they encounter unexpected friends and foes, magic and weaponry, dragons and men, it will change the very course of their destiny. Will they finally find Guwayne?

Darius and his few friends survive the massacre of their people—but only to find that they are captives, thrown into the Empire Arena. Shackled together, facing unimaginable opponents, their only hope for survival is to stand and fight together, as brothers.

Gwendolyn wakes from her slumber to discover that she and the others have survived their trek across the Great Waste—and even more shocking, that they have come to a land beyond their wildest imagination. As they are brought into a new royal court, the secrets Gwendolyn learns about her ancestors and her own people will change her destiny forever.

Erec and Alistair, still captive at sea, struggle to break free from the grips of the Empire fleet in a bold and daring nighttime escape. When odds seem at their worst, they receive an unexpected surprise that might just give them a second chance for victory—and another chance to continue their attack on the heart of the Empire.

Godfrey and his crew, imprisoned once again, set to be executed, have one last chance to try to escape. After being betrayed, they want more than escape this time—they want vengeance.

Volusia is surrounded on all sides as she strives to take and hold the Empire capital—and she will have to summon a more powerful magic than she's ever known if she is to prove herself a Goddess, and become Supreme Ruler of the Empire. Once again, the fate of the Empire hangs in the balance.

With its sophisticated world-building and characterization, A DREAM OF MORTALS is an epic tale of friends and lovers, of rivals and suitors, of knights and dragons, of intrigues and political machinations, of coming of age, of broken hearts, of deception, ambition and betrayal. It is a tale of honor and courage, of fate and destiny, of sorcery. It is a fantasy that brings us into a world we will never forget, and which will appeal to all ages and genders.

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Morgan Rice
A DREAM OF MORTALS

CHAPTER ONE

Gwendolyn slowly opened her eyes, caked with sand, the effort taking all of her strength. She could only open them a sliver, and she squinted out at a world that was blurry, filled with sunlight. Somewhere up above, the glaring desert suns shone down, creating a world that blinded her with white. Gwen did not know if she were dead or alive—she suspected the latter.

Blinded by the light, Gwen was too weak to turn her head left or right. *Was this what it was like*, she wondered, *to be dead*?

Suddenly, a shadow was cast over her face, and she blinked to see a black hood above her, obscuring the face of a small creature, its face hidden in darkness. All Gwen could see were its beady yellow eyes, staring down at her, examining her as if she were some object lost on the desert floor. It made a strange squeaking noise, and Gwen realized it was speaking in a language she did not understand.

There came a shuffling of feet, a small cloud of dust, and two more of these creatures appeared over her, faces covered with black hoods, all their eyes aglow, brighter than the sun. They squeaked, seeming to communicate with one another. Gwen could not tell what sort of creatures they were, and she wondered once again if she were alive, or if this were all a dream. Was it another one of the hallucinations she'd suffered during these past days in the desert heat?

Gwen felt a poke on her shoulder, and she opened her eyes again to see one of the creatures reaching down with its staff and jabbing her, presumably testing to see if she were still alive. Gwen wanted to reach up and swat it away, annoyed—but was too weak for even that. She welcomed the sensation, though; it made her feel that maybe, just maybe, she was alive after all.

Gwen suddenly felt long, thin claws wrap around her wrists, her arms, and felt herself being picked up, hoisted onto some sort of cloth, perhaps a canvas. She felt herself being dragged across the desert floor, sliding backwards beneath the sun. She had no idea if she were being dragged off to her death, but she was too weak to care. She looked up and saw the world go by, the sky bouncing as she did, the suns as blazing hot and brilliant as ever. She had never felt so weak or dehydrated in her life; each breath felt as if she were breathing fire.

Gwen suddenly felt a cold liquid run down her lips, and she saw one of the creatures leaning over her, pouring water from a sack. It took all of her energy just to manage to stick out her tongue. The cool water trickled down her throat, and it felt as if she were swallowing fire. She hadn't realized her throat could become this dry.

Gwendolyn drank greedily, relieved that at least these creatures

were friendly. The creature, though, stopped pouring after a few seconds, pulling back the sack.

"More," Gwen tried to whisper—but the words wouldn't come out, her voice still too raspy.

Gwen continued to be dragged and she tried to muster the energy to break free, to reach out and grab that sack, to drink all the water that was in there. But she did not have the energy to even lift an arm.

Gwen was dragged and dragged, her legs and feet hitting bumps and rocks beneath, and it seemed to go on forever. After a while she could no longer tell how much time had passed. It felt like days. The only sound she heard was that of the desert wind ripping through, carrying more dust and heat.

Gwen felt more cold water on her lips, and drank more this time, until it was pulled away. She opened her eyes a bit further, and as she saw the creature pull it away, she realized that he was feeding her slowly so as not to give her too much at once. The water trickling down her throat did not feel quite as harsh this time, and she felt the hydration rushing to her veins. She realized how desperately she needed it.

"Please," Gwen said, "more."

The creature, instead, poured some water over her face, her eyes, and the cool water felt so refreshing as it trickled down her hot skin. It took some of the dust off of her eyelids, and she was able to open them a bit more—enough to at least see what was happening.

All around her Gwen saw more of these creatures, dozens of them, shuffling along the desert floor in their black cloaks and hoods, speaking amongst themselves with strange squeaking noises. She looked over just enough to see them carrying several more bodies, and she felt an immense sense of relief to recognize the bodies of Kendrick, Sandara, Aberthol, Brandt, Atme, Illepra, the baby, Steffen, Arliss, several Silver, and Krohn—perhaps a dozen or so in all. They were all being dragged alongside her, and Gwen couldn't tell if they were alive or dead. From the way they all lay, all so limp, she could only assume they were dead.

Her heart sank, and Gwen prayed to God that wasn't the case. Yet she was pessimistic. After all, who could have survived out here? She was still not entirely sure that *she* had survived.

As she continued to be dragged, Gwen closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she realized that she had fallen asleep. She did not know how much more time had passed, but it was now late in the day, the two suns low in the sky. She was still being dragged. She wondered who these creatures were; she assumed them to be desert nomads of some sort, perhaps some tribe who had somehow managed to survive out here. She wondered how they'd found her, where they

were taking her. On the one hand, she was so grateful that they had saved her life; on the other, who knew if they were taking her to be killed? To be a meal for the tribe?

Either way, she was too weak and exhausted to do anything about it.

Gwen opened her eyes, she did not know how much later, startled by a rustling sound. At first it sounded like a distant thorn bush whirling across the desert floor. But as the sound grew louder, more incessant, she knew it was something else. It sounded like a sandstorm. A raging, incessant sandstorm.

As they neared it and the people carrying her turned, Gwen looked over and was afforded a view unlike any she had ever seen. It was a view that made her stomach churn, especially as she realized they were approaching it: there, perhaps fifty feet away, was a wall of raging sand, rising right up into the sky, so high she could not see if it had an end. The wind blew violently through it, like a contained tornado, and the sand churned violently in the air, so thick she could not see through it.

They headed right for this wall of raging sand, the noise so loud it was deafening, and she wondered why. It seemed like they were approaching instant death.

“Turn back!” Gwen tried to say.

But her voice was hoarse, too weak for anyone to hear, especially over the wind. She doubted they’d listen to her, even if they had heard her.

Gwen began to feel the sand scraping her skin as they neared the churning sand wall, and suddenly two creatures approached her and draped a long, heavy sheet over her, draping it over her body, covering her face. She realized they were shielding her.

A moment later, Gwen found herself in a violent wall of churning sand.

As they entered it, the noise was so loud, Gwen felt as if she would go deaf, and she wondered how she could possibly survive this. Gwen realized right away that this canvas over her was saving her; it protected her face and skin from being torn apart by the raging wall of sand. The nomads marched on, their heads down low against the sand wall, as if they had done this many times before. They continued to yank her through it, and as the sand raged all around her, and Gwen wondered if it would ever have an end.

Then, finally, there came silence. Sweet, sweet silence, like she had never savored before. Two nomads removed the canvas from her, and Gwen saw they had cleared the sand wall, had emerged out the other side. But the other side of what? she wondered.

Finally, the dragging came to a stop and as it did, all Gwen’s

questions were answered. They set her down gently, and she lay there, unmoving, looking up at the sky. She blinked several times, trying to comprehend the sight before her.

Slowly, the view before her came into focus. She saw an impossibly high wall made of rock, climbing hundreds of feet into the clouds. The wall stretched in all directions, disappearing into the horizon. At the top of these towering cliffs, Gwen saw ramparts, fortifications, and atop them, thousands of knights wearing armor that shone in the sun.

She could not understand. How could they be here? she wondered. Knights, in the middle of the desert? Where had they taken her?

Then suddenly, with a jolt, she knew. Her heart beat faster as she suddenly realized they had found it, had made it here, all the way across the Great Waste.

It existed, after all.

The Second Ring.

CHAPTER TWO

Angel felt herself plummeting through the air as she dove down, headfirst, for the raging waters of the churning sea below. She could still see Thorgrin's body submerged beneath the water, unconscious, limp, sinking down deeper with every passing moment. She knew that he could be dead within moments, and that if she hadn't dove off the ship when she had, he would certainly have no chance to live.

She was determined to save him—even if it meant her life, even if she died down there with him. She could not really understand it, but she felt an intense connection to Thor, ever since the moment they had first met back on her island. He had been the only one she had ever met who was unafraid of her leprosy, who had given her a hug despite it, who had looked at her as a normal person, and who had never shied away from her for a minute. She felt she owed him a great debt, felt an intense loyalty to him, and she would sacrifice her life for him, whatever the cost.

Angel felt her skin pierced by the icy cold waters as she was submerged. It felt like a million daggers piercing her skin. It was so cold it startled her, and she held her breath as she plunged down, deeper and deeper, opening her eyes in the murky waters and searching for Thorgrin. She barely spotted him in the darkness, sinking lower and lower, and she gave a great kick, again and again, reached out and, using her downward momentum, just grabbed his sleeve.

He was heavier than she thought. She wrapped both arms around him, turned around, and kicked furiously, using all her might to get them to stop descending and instead ascend. Angel wasn't big and she wasn't strong, but she had learned quickly growing up that her legs held a strength that her upper body did not. Her arms were weak from the leprosy but her legs were her gift, stronger than a man's, and she used them now, kicking for her life, swimming upwards toward the surface. If there was one thing she had learned growing up on an island, it was how to swim.

Angel kicked their way out of the murky deep, up higher and higher toward the surface, looking up and seeing sunlight reflected down through the waves above.

Come on! she thought. *Just a few more feet!*

Exhausted, unable to hold her breath much longer, she willed herself to kick harder—and with one last kick, she exploded up to the surface.

Angel came up gasping for air and she brought Thor up with her, her arms wrapped around him, using her legs to keep them afloat,

kicking and kicking, holding his head above the surface. He still appeared unconscious to her, and now she worried if he had drowned.

"Thorgrin!" she cried. "Wake up!"

Angel grabbed him from behind, wrapped her arms tight around his stomach, and pulled sharply toward her, again and again, as she had seen one of her leper friends do once when another friend was drowning. She did it now, pulling up into his diaphragm, her little arms shaking as she did.

"Please, Thorgrin," she cried. "Please live! Live for me!"

Angel suddenly heard a gratifying cough, followed by throwing up of water, and she was elated to realize that Thor had come back. He threw up all the sea water as he racked his lungs, coughing up again and again. Angel was flooded with relief.

Even better, Thor seemed to have regained consciousness. The whole ordeal seemed to have finally shaken him from his deep slumber. Maybe, she hoped, he would even be strong enough to fight off these men and help them escape somewhere.

Angel had hardly finished the thought when she suddenly felt a heavy rope land on her head, dropping down from the sky and completely engulfing her and Thorgrin.

She looked up and saw the cutthroats standing over them at the edge of the ship, staring down, grabbing hold of the other end of the rope and yanking it up, hoisting them in as if they were fish. Angel struggled, thrashing at the rope, and she hoped Thor would, too. But while he coughed, Thor still lay there limply, and she could tell he clearly didn't have the strength yet to defend.

Angel felt them slowly hoisted up in the air, higher and higher, water dripping down from the net, as the pirates pulled them closer, back to the ship.

"NO!" she yelled, thrashing, trying to break free.

A cutthroat held out a long iron hook, hooked the net, and yanked them with one jerky motion for the deck.

They swung through the air, the cords were cut, and Angel felt herself falling as they landed hard on the deck, dropping a good ten feet and tumbling as they did. Angel's ribs hurt from the impact and she thrashed at the rope, trying to break free.

But it was no use. Within moments several pirates jumped on top of them, pinning her and Thorgrin down and yanking them out. Angel felt several rough hands grab her, and felt her wrists bound behind her back with coarse rope as she was dragged to her feet, dripping wet. She could not even move.

Angel looked over, worried for Thorgrin, and she saw him being bound, too, still out of it, more asleep than awake. They were each dragged together across the deck, too fast, Angel stumbling as they

went.

"This will teach you to try to get away from us," a pirate snapped.

Angel looked up and saw before her a wooden door to the lower deck being opened, and she stared into the blackness of the lower holds of the deck. The next thing she knew she and Thor were thrown by the pirates.

Angel felt herself go tumbling as she went flying headfirst into the blackness. She hit her head hard on the wood floor, landing face first, and then felt the weight of Thor's body landing on top of her, the two of them rolling into the blackness.

The wooden door to the deck was slammed from above, blocking out all the light, then locked with a heavy chain, and she lay there, breathing hard in the blackness, wondering where the pirates had thrown her.

At the far end of the hold sunlight suddenly came flooding in and she saw the pirates had opened up a wooden hatch, covered by iron bars. Several faces appeared above, sneering down, some of them spitting, before they walked away. Before they slammed this hatch down, too, Angel heard a reassuring voice in the darkness.

"It's okay. You're not alone."

Angel started, surprised and relieved to hear a voice, and she was shocked and elated as she turned to see all of her friends sitting down there in the blackness, all with their hands bound behind their back. There sat Reece and Selese, Elden and Indra, O'Connor and Matus, all of them captive but alive. She had been so sure they had all been killed at sea, and was flooded with relief.

Yet she was also filled with foreboding: if all these great warriors had been taken prisoner, she thought, what chance did any of them ever have of making it out of here alive?

CHAPTER THREE

Erec sat on the wooden deck of his own ship, his back against a pole, his hands bound behind him, and looked out with dismay at the sight before him. The remaining ships of his fleet were spread out before him in the calm ocean waters, all held captive in the night, blockaded by the fleet of a thousand Empire ships. They were all anchored in place, lit up beneath the two full moons, his ships flying the banners of his homeland and Empire ships flying the black-and-gold banners of the Empire. It was a disheartening sight. He had surrendered to spare his men from a certain death—and yet now they were at the mercy of the Empire, common prisoners with no way out.

Erec could see the Empire soldiers occupying each of his ships, as they occupied his, a dozen Empire soldiers standing guard per ship, staring lackadaisically at the ocean. On the decks of his ships Erec could see a hundred men on each, all lined up, bound with their wrists behind their back. On each ship they outnumbered the Empire guards, but clearly the Empire guards were not concerned. With all the men bound, they did not really need *any* men to watch over them, much less a dozen. Erec's men had surrendered, and clearly, with their fleet blockaded, there was nowhere for them to go.

As Erec looked out at the sight before him, he was racked with guilt. He had never surrendered before in his life, and to have to do so now pained him to no end. He had to remind himself he was a commander now, not a mere foot soldier, and he had a responsibility to all of his men. As outnumbered as they'd been, he could not have allowed them to all be killed. Clearly, they'd walked into a trap, thanks to Krov, and fighting at that moment would have been futile. His father had taught him that the first law of being a commander was to know when to fight and when to lay down your arms and choose to fight another day, another way. It was bravado and pride, he'd said, that led to most men's deaths. It was sound advice, but hard advice to follow.

"I myself would have fought," came a voice beside him, sounding like the voice of his conscience.

Erec looked over to see his brother, Strom, bound to a post beside him, looking as unflappable and confident as ever, despite the circumstances.

Erec frowned.

"You would have fought, and all of our men would be dead," Erec replied.

Strom shrugged.

"We will go down either way, my brother," he replied. "The

Empire has nothing but cruelty. At least, my way, we would have gone down with glory. Now we will be killed by these men, but it won't be on our feet—it will be on our backs, their swords at our throats."

"Or worse," said one of Erec's commanders, bound to a post beside Strom, "we will be taken as slaves and never live as free men again. Is this what we followed you for?"

"You don't know any of that," Erec said. "No one knows what the Empire will do. At least we are alive. At least we have a chance. The other way would have guaranteed death."

Strom looked at Erec with disappointment.

"It is not a decision our father would have made."

Erec reddened.

"You don't know what our father would have done."

"Don't I?" Strom countered. "I lived with him, grew up with him on the Isles all my life, while you cavorted about the Ring. You barely knew him. And I say our father would have fought."

Erec shook his head.

"These are easy words for a soldier," he countered. "If you were a commander, your words might be quite different. I knew enough about our father to know that he would have saved his men, at any cost. He was not rash, and not impetuous. He was proud, but not overflowing with pride. Our father *the foot soldier*, in his youth, as you, might have fought; but our father *the King* would have been prudent and lived to fight another day. There are things you will understand, Strom, as you grow up to become a man."

Strom reddened.

"I am more man than you."

Erec sighed.

"You don't really understand what battle means," he said. "Not until you lose. Not until you watch your men die before you. You have never lost. You have been sheltered on that Isle all your life. And that has formed your hubris. I love you as a brother—but not as a commander."

They fell into a tense silence, a truce of sorts, as Erec looked up into the night, looking at the endless stars, and took stock of the situation. He truly loved his brother, but so often in life they argued about everything; they just didn't see two things the same way. Erec gave himself time to cool off, took a deep breath, then finally turned back to Strom.

"I don't mean for us to surrender," he added, more calmly. "Not as prisoners, and not as slaves. You must take a broader view: surrendering is sometimes just the first step in battle. You don't always encounter an enemy with your sword drawn: sometimes the

best way to fight him is with open arms. You can always swing the sword later."

Strom looked at him, puzzled.

"And then how do you plan to get us out of this?" he asked. "We have forfeited our arms. We are captives, bound, unable to move. We are surrounded by a fleet of a thousand ships. We stand no chance."

Erec shook his head.

"You don't see the whole picture," he said. "None of our men are dead. We still have our ships. We may be prisoners, but I see few Empire guards on each of our ships—which means we outnumber them greatly. All that's needed is a spark to light the fire. We can take them by surprise—and we can escape."

Strom shook his head.

"We cannot overcome them," he said. "We are bound, helpless, so the numbers mean nothing. And even if we did, we'd be crushed by the fleet which surrounds us."

Erec turned, ignoring his brother, not interested in his pessimism. He instead looked over at Alistair, sitting several feet away, bound to a post on his other side. His heart broke as he examined her; she sat there, captive, all thanks to him. For himself, he did not mind being prisoner—that was the price of war. But for her, it broke his heart. He would give anything not to see her like this.

Erec felt so indebted to her; after all, she had saved their lives yet again, back in the Dragon's Spine, against that sea monster. He knew she was still spent from the effort, knew she was unable to muster any energy. Yet Erec knew that she was their only hope.

"Alistair," he called out again, as he had all night long, every few minutes. He leaned over and with his foot, he brushed her foot, gently nudging her. He would give anything to undo his binds, to be able to go over to her, to hug her, to free her. It was the most helpless feeling to lay beside her, and to be unable to do anything about it.

"Alistair," he called out. "Please. It's Erec. Wake up. I beg you. I need you—*we* need you."

Erec waited, as he had all night long, losing hope. He did not know if she would ever return to him after her last exertion.

"*Alistair*," he pleaded, again and again. "Please. Wake up for me."

Erec waited, watching her, but she did not move. She lay so still, unconscious, as beautiful as ever in the moonlight. Erec willed for her to come to life.

Erec looked away, lowered his head, and closed his eyes. Perhaps all was lost, after all. There was simply nothing else he could do at this point.

"I'm here," came a soft voice, ringing through the night.

Erec looked up with hope and turned to see Alistair staring back

at him, and his heart beat faster, overwhelmed with love and joy. She looked exhausted, her eyes barely open, as she sleepily stared back at him.

"Alistair, my love," he said urgently. "I need you. Just this one last time. I can't do this without you."

She closed her eyes for a long time, and then opened them, just a bit.

"What do you need?" she asked.

"Our bonds," he said. "We need you to free us. All of us."

Alistair closed her eyes again, and a long time elapsed, during which Erec could hear nothing save the wind caressing the ship, the gentle lapping of the waves against the hull. A heavy silence filled the air, and as more time passed, Erec felt sure she would not open them again.

Finally, slowly, Erec watched her open her eyes again.

With what appeared to be a monumental effort, Alistair opened her eyes, lifted her chin, and looked all about the ships, taking stock of everything. He could see her eyes changing colors, glowing a light blue, lighting up the night like two torches.

Suddenly, Alistair's binds broke. Erec heard them snap in the night, then saw her raise her two palms before her. An intense light shone from them.

A moment later, Erec felt a heat behind his back, along his wrists. They felt impossibly hot, then suddenly, his binds began to loosen. One strip at a time, Erec felt each of his ropes breaking free, until finally he was able to snap them himself.

Erec raised his wrists and examined them in disbelief. He was free. He was truly free.

Erec heard the snapping of cords and looked over to see Strom break free of his binds. The snapping continued, all throughout the ship, and throughout his other ships, and he saw his other men's bonds breaking, saw his men being freed, one at a time.

They all looked to Erec, and he held a finger to his lips, motioning for them to be quiet. Erec saw the guards had not noticed, all with their backs to them, standing at the rail, jesting with each other and looking at the night. Of course, none of them were on guard.

Erec motioned for Strom and the others to follow, and quietly, Erec leading the way, they all crept forward, heading for the guards.

"Now!" Erec commanded.

He burst into a sprint and they all did the same, rushing forward as one, until they reached the guards. As they got close, some of the guards, alerted by the wood creaking on the deck, spun around and began to draw their swords.

But Erec and the others, all hardened warriors, all desperate for

their one chance to survive, beat them to it, moving too quickly through the night. Strom pounced on one and grabbed his wrist before he could swing; Erec reached into the man's belt, drew his dagger, and cut his throat while Strom snatched the sword. Despite all their differences, the two brothers worked seamlessly together, as they always did, fighting as one.

Erec's men all snatched weapons from the guards, killing them with their own swords and daggers. Other men simply tackled the guards who moved too slowly, shoving them over the rail, screaming, and sending them into the sea.

Erec looked out at his other ships, and saw his men killing guards left and right.

"Cut the anchors!" Erec commanded.

Up and down his ships his men severed the ropes, keeping them in place, and soon Erec felt the familiar feeling of his ship rocking beneath him. Finally, they were free.

Horns sounded, shouts rang out, and torches were lit up and down ships as the greater Empire fleet finally realized what was happening. Erec turned and looked out at the blockade of ships blocking their way to the open sea, and he knew that he had the fight of his life ahead of him.

But he no longer cared. His men were alive. They were free. Now they had a chance.

And now, this time, they would go down fighting.

CHAPTER FOUR

Darius felt his face sprayed with blood, and he turned to see a dozen of his men cut down by an Empire soldier riding an immense black horse. The soldier swung a sword larger than any Darius had ever seen, and in one clean sweep he chopped off twelve of their heads.

Darius heard shouts rise up all around him, and he turned in every direction to see his men being cut down everywhere. It was surreal. They swung with great blows, and his men fell by the dozens, then the hundreds—then the thousands.

Darius suddenly found himself standing on a pedestal, and as far as the eye could see lay thousands of corpses. All his people, piled up dead inside the walls of Volusia. There was no one left. Not a single man.

Darius let out a great shout of agony, of helplessness, as he felt himself grabbed from behind by Empire soldiers and dragged off, screaming, into the blackness.

Darius woke with a start, gasping for air, flailing. He looked all around, trying to understand what was happening, what was real and what was a dream. He heard the rustling of chains and as his eyes adjusted in the darkness, he began to realize where the noise was coming from. He looked down to see his ankles shackled with heavy chains. He felt the aches and pains all over his body, the sting of fresh wounds, and he saw his body covered in wounds, dried blood caked all over him. Every movement ached, and he felt as if he had been pummeled by a million men. One of his eyes was swollen nearly shut.

Slowly, Darius turned and surveyed his surroundings. On the one hand he was relieved that it had all been a dream—yet as he took it all in he slowly remembered, and the pain came back. It had been a dream, and yet there had also been much truth in it. There returned to him flashbacks of his battle against the Empire within the gates of Volusia. He recalled the ambush, the gates closing, the troops surrounding them—all of his men being slaughtered. The betrayal.

He struggled hard to bring it all back, and the final thing he remembered, after killing several Empire soldiers, was taking a blow the side of his head from the blunt end of an ax.

Darius reached up, chains rattling, and felt a huge welt on the side of his head, coming all the way down to the swelling in his eye. That had been no dream. That was real.

As it all came back, Darius was flooded with anguish, with regret. His men, all the people he had loved, had been killed. All because of him.

He looked around frantically in the dim light, looking for any sign of any of his men, any sign of survivors. Perhaps many had lived, and had, like him, been taken prisoner.

"Move on!" came a harsh command in the blackness.

Darius felt rough hands pick up him up from beneath his arms, drag him to his feet, then felt a boot kick him in the back of his spine.

He groaned in pain as he stumbled forward, chains rattling, feeling himself go flying into the back of a boy before him. The boy reached back and elbowed Darius in the face, sending him stumbling backwards.

"Don't touch me again," the boy snarled.

There stared back a desperate-looking boy, in shackles like he, and Darius realized he was shackled to a long line of boys, in both directions, long links of heavy iron connecting their wrists and ankles, all of them being herded down a dim stone tunnel. Empire taskmasters kicked and elbowed them along.

Darius scanned the faces as best he could, but recognized no one.

"Darius!" whispered an urgent voice. "Don't collapse again! They'll kill you!"

Darius's heart leapt at the sound of a familiar voice, and he turned to see a few men behind him on the line, Desmond, Raj, Kaz, and Luzi, his old friends, the four of them all chained, all looking as badly beaten as he must have looked. They all looked at him with relief, clearly happy to see that he was alive.

"Talk again," a taskmaster seethed to Raj, "and I'll take your tongue."

Darius, as relieved as he was to see his friends, wondered about the countless others who had fought and served with him, who had followed him into the streets of Volusia.

The taskmaster moved further down the line, and when he was out of sight, Darius turned and whispered back.

"What of the others? Did anyone else survive?"

He prayed secretly that hundreds of his men had made it, that they were somewhere waiting, prisoners maybe.

"No," came the decisive answer from behind them. "We're the only ones. All the others are dead."

Darius felt as if he had been punched in the gut. He felt he had let everyone down, and despite himself, he felt a tear roll down his cheek.

He felt like sobbing. A part of him wanted to die. He could hardly conceive it: all those warriors from all those slave villages…. It had been the beginning of what was going to be the greatest revolution of all time, one that would change the face of the Empire forever.

And it had ended abruptly in a mass slaughter.

Now any chance of freedom they'd had was destroyed.

As Darius marched, in agony from the wounds and the bruises, from the iron shackles digging into his skin, he looked around and began to wonder where he was. He wondered who these other prisoners were, and where they were all being led. As he looked them over, he realized that they were all about his age, and they all seemed extraordinarily fit. As if they were all fighters.

They rounded a bend in the dark stone tunnel, and sunlight suddenly met them, streaming through iron cell bars up ahead, at the end of the tunnel. Darius was shoved roughly, jabbed in the ribs with a club, and he surged forward with the others until the bars were opened and he was given one final kick, out into daylight.

Darius stumbled with the others and they all fell down as a group onto the dirt. Darius spit dirt from his mouth and raised his hands to protect himself from the harsh sunlight. Others rolled on top of him, all of them tangled up in the shackles.

“On your feet!” shouted a taskmaster.

They walked from boy to boy, jabbing them with clubs, until finally Darius scrambled with the others to his feet. He stumbled as the other boys, chained to him, tried to gain their balance.

They stood and faced the center of a circular dirt courtyard, perhaps fifty feet in diameter, framed by high stone walls, cell bars around its openings. Facing them, standing in the center, scowling back, stood one Empire taskmaster, clearly their commander. He loomed large, taller than the others, with his yellow horns and skin, and his glistening red eyes, wearing no shirt, his muscles bulging. He wore black armor on his legs, boots, and studded leather on his wrists. He wore the rankings of an Empire officer, and he paced up and down, examining them all with disapproval.

“I am Morg,” he said, his voice dark, booming with authority. “You will address me as sir. I am your new warden. I am your whole life now.”

He breathed as he paced, sounding more like a snarl.

“Welcome to your new home,” he continued. “Your temporary home, that is. Because before the moon is up, you will all be dead. I will take great pleasure in watching you all die, in fact.”

He smiled.

“But for as long as you are here,” he added, “you will live. You will live to please me. You will live to please the others. You will live to please the Empire. You are our objects of entertainment now. Our show things. Our entertainment means your death. And you will execute it well.”

He smiled a cruel smile as he continued pacing, surveying them. There came a great shout somewhere off in the distance, and the entire ground trembled beneath Darius’s feet. It sounded like the shout

of a hundred thousand citizens filled with bloodlust.

"Do you hear that cry?" he asked. "That is the cry of death. A thirst for death. Out there, behind those walls, lies the great arena. In that arena, you will fight others, you will fight yourselves, until none of you are left."

He sighed.

"There will be three rounds of battle," he added. "In the final around, if any of you survive, you will be granted your freedom, granted a chance to fight in the greatest arena of all. But don't get your hopes up: no one has ever survived that long.

"You will not die quickly," he added. "I am here to make sure of it. I want you dying slowly. I want you to be great objects of entertainment. You will learn to fight, and learn it well, to prolong our pleasure. Because you are not men anymore. You are not slaves. You are lower than slaves: you are gladiators now. Welcome to your new, and final, role. It won't last long."

CHAPTER FIVE

Volusia marched through the desert, her hundreds of thousands of men behind her, the sound of their marching boots filling the sky. It was a sweet sound to her ears, a sound of progress, of victory. She looked out as she went, and she was satisfied to see corpses lining the horizon, everywhere on the dried hard sands outlying the Empire capital. Thousands of them, sprawled out, all perfectly still, lying on their backs and looking up to the sky in agony, as if they had been flattened by a giant tidal wave.

Volusia knew it was no tidal wave. It was her sorcerers, the Voks. They had cast a very powerful spell, and had killed all those who thought they could ambush and kill her.

Volusia smirked as she marched, seeing her handiwork, relishing in this day of victory, in once again outsmarting those who meant to kill her. These were all Empire leaders, all great men, men who had never been defeated before, and the only thing standing between her and the capital. Now here they were, all these Empire leaders, all the men who had dared to defy Volusia, all the men who had thought they were smarter than her—all of them dead.

Volusia marched between them, sometimes avoiding the bodies, sometimes stepping over them, and sometimes, when she felt like it, stepping right on them. She took great satisfaction in feeling the enemy's flesh beneath her boots. It made her feel like a kid again.

Volusia looked up and saw the capital up ahead, its huge golden dome shining unmistakably in the distance, saw the massive walls surrounding it, a hundred feet high, noted its entrance, framed by soaring, arched golden doors, and felt the thrill of her destiny unfolding before her. Now, nothing lay between her and her final seat of power. No more politicians or leaders or commanders could stand in her way with any claim to rule the Empire but she. The long march, her taking one city after the next all these moons, her amassing her army one city at a time—finally, it all came to this. Just beyond those walls, just beyond those shining golden doors, stood her final conquest. Soon, she would be inside, she would assume the throne of power, and when she did, there would be no one and nothing left to stop her. She would take command of all the Empire's armies, of all its provinces and regions, the four horns and two spikes, and finally, every last creature of the Empire would have to declare her—a human—their supreme commander.

Even more so, they would have to call her *Goddess*.

The thought of it made her smile. She would erect statues of herself in every city, before every hall of power; she would name

holidays after herself, make people salute each other by her name, and the Empire would soon know no name but hers.

Volusia marched before her army beneath the early morning suns, examining those golden doors and realizing this would be one of the greatest moments of her life. Leading the way before her men, she felt invincible—especially now that all the traitors within her ranks were dead. How foolish they had been, she thought, to assume she was naïve, to assume she would fall into their trap, just because she was young. So much for their old age—so far that had gotten them. It had gained them only an early death, an early death for underestimating her wisdom—a wisdom even greater than theirs.

And yet, as Volusia marched, as she studied the Empire bodies in the desert, she began to feel a growing sense of concern. There weren't as many bodies, she realized, as there should have been. There were perhaps a few thousand bodies, yet not the hundreds of thousands she had expected, not the main body of the Empire army. Had those leaders not brought all their men? And if not, where could they be?

She started to wonder: with its leaders dead, would the Empire capital still defend itself?

As Volusia neared the capital gates, she motioned for Vokin to step forward and for her army to stop.

As one, they all came to a stop behind her and finally there came a stillness in the morning desert, nothing but the sound of the wind passing through, the dust rising in the air, a thorn bush tumbling. Volusia studied the massive sealed doors, the gold carved in ornate patterns and signs and symbols, telling stories of the ancient battles of the Empire lands. These doors were famous throughout the Empire, were said to have taken a hundred years to carve, and to be twelve feet thick. It was a sign of strength representing all the Empire lands.

Volusia, standing hardly fifty feet away, had never been so close to the capital entrance before, and was in awe of them—and of what they represented. Not only was it a symbol of strength and stability, it was also a masterpiece, an ancient work of art. She ached to reach out and touch those golden doors, to run her hands along the carved images.

But she knew now was not the time. She studied them, and a sense of foreboding began to arise within her. Something was wrong. They were unguarded. And it was all too quiet.

Volusia looked straight up, and atop the walls, manning the parapets, she saw thousands of Empire soldiers slowly come into view, lined up, looking down, bows and spears at the ready.

An Empire general stood in their midst, looking down at them.

"You are foolish to come so close," he boomed out, his voice echoing. "You stand in range of our bows and spears. With the twitch

of my finger, I can have you all killed in an instant.

"But I will grant you mercy," added. "Tell your armies to lay down their arms, and I will allow you to live."

Volusia looked up at the general, his face obscured against the sun, this lone commander left behind to defend the capital, and she looked across the ramparts at his men, all their eyes trained on her, bows in their hands. She knew he meant what he'd said.

"I will give you one chance to lay down *your* arms," she called back, "before I kill all of your men, and burn this capital down to rubble."

He snickered, and she watched as he and all his men lowered their face plates, preparing for battle.

As quick as lightning, Volusia suddenly heard the sound of a thousand arrows releasing, of a thousand spears being thrown, and as she looked up, she watched the sky blacken, thick with weaponry, all firing down right for her.

Volusia stood there, rooted to her spot, fearless, not even flinching. She knew that none of these weapons could harm her. After all, she was a goddess.

Beside her, the Vok raised a single long, green palm, and as he did, a green orb left his hand and floated up in the air before her, casting a shield of green light a few feet above Volusia's head. A moment later, the arrows and spears bounced off it harmlessly and landed down on the ground beside her in a huge heap.

Volusia looked over in satisfaction at the growing pile of spears and arrows, and looked back up to see the stunned faces of all the empire soldiers.

"I will give you one more chance to lay down your arms!" she called back.

The empire commander stood there sternly, clearly frustrated and debating his options, but he did not budge. Instead he motioned to his men, and she could see them preparing another volley.

Volusia nodded to Vokin, and he gestured to his men. Dozens of Voks stepped forward and they all lined up and raised their hands high above their heads, aiming their palms. A moment later, dozens of green orbs filled the sky, heading for the capital walls.

Volusia watched in great expectation, expecting the walls to crumble, expecting to see all the men come crashing down at her feet, expecting the capital to be hers. She was anxious to sit on the throne already.

But Volusia watched in surprise and dismay as the green orbs of light bounced off the capital walls harmlessly, then disappeared in bright flashes of light. She could not understand: they were ineffectual.

Volusia looked over at Vokin, and he looked baffled, too.

The Empire commander, high above, snickered down.

“You are not the only one with sorcery,” he said. “These capital walls can be toppled by no magic—they have stood the test of time for thousands of years, have warded off barbarians, entire armies greater than yours. There is no magic than can topple them—only human hands.”

He grinned wide.

“So you see,” he added, “you’ve walked into the same mistake as so many other would-be conquerors before you. You’ve relied on sorcery in approaching this capital—and now you will pay the price.”

Up and down the parapets horns sounded, and Volusia looked over and was shocked to see an army of soldiers lining the horizon. They filled the skyline with black, hundreds of thousands of them, a vast army, greater even than the men she had behind her. They clearly had all been waiting beyond the wall, on the far side of the capital city, in the desert, for the command of the Empire commander. She had not just walked into another battle—this would be an outright war.

Another horn sounded, and suddenly, the massive golden doors before her began to open. They open wider and wider, and as they did there came a great battle cry, as thousands more Empire soldiers emerged, charging right for them.

At the same time, the hundreds of thousands of soldiers on the horizon charged, too, splitting their forces around the Empire city and charging them from both sides.

Volusia stood her ground, raised a single fist high, then brought it down.

Behind her, her army let out a great battle cry as they rushed forward to meet the Empire men.

Volusia knew this would be the battle that decided the fate of the capital—the very fate of the Empire. Her sorcerers had let her down—but her soldiers would not. After all, she could be more brutal than any other man, and she did not need sorcery for that.

She saw the men coming at her, and she stood her ground, relishing the chance to kill or be killed.

CHAPTER SIX

Gwendolyn opened her eyes as she felt a jolt and a bump on her head, and she looked all about, disoriented. She saw she was lying on her side, on a hard wooden platform, and the world was moving about her. There came a whining, and she felt something wet on her cheek. She looked over to see Krohn, curling up beside her, licking her—and her heart leapt with joy. Krohn looked sickly, famished, exhausted—yet he was alive. That was all that mattered. He, too, had survived.

Gwen licked her lips and realized they were not as dry as before; she was relieved she could even lick them, as before her tongue had been too swollen to even move. She felt a trickle of cold water enter her mouth, and she looked up out of the corner of her eye to see one of those desert nomads standing over her, holding a sack over her. She licked at it greedily, again and again, until he pulled it away.

As he pulled his hand away, Gwen reached up and grabbed his wrist, and she pulled it toward Krohn. At first the nomad seemed baffled, but then he realized, and he reached over and poured some of the water into Krohn's mouth. Gwen felt relieved as she watched Krohn lap up the water, drinking as he lay there, panting, beside her.

Gwen felt another jolt on her head, another bump as the platform shook, and she looked out at the world, turned sideways, and saw nothing but sky before her, clouds passing by. She felt her body rising up, higher and higher into the air with each and every jolt, and she could not understand what was happening, where she was. She did not have the strength to sit up, but she was able to crane her neck enough to see that she was lying on a broad wooden platform, being hoisted by ropes at either end of it. Someone high above was yanking on the ropes, squeaking with age, and with each yank, the platform rose a bit higher. She was being raised up alongside steep, endless cliffs, the same cliffs she recognized from before she'd passed out. The cliffs which had been crowned by parapets and gleaming knights.

Remembering, Gwen turned and craned her neck, and she looked down and immediately felt dizzy. They were hundreds of feet above the desert floor, and rising.

She turned and looked up, and a hundred feet above them, she saw the parapets, her vision obscured by the sun, and the knights looking down, getting closer with each yank of the cords.

Gwen immediately turned and scanned the platform, and was flooded with relief to see all of her people were still with her: Kendrick, Sandara, Steffen, Arliss, Aberthol, Illepra, the baby Krea, Stara, Brant, Atme, and several of the Silver. They all lay on the platform, all being tended to by nomads who poured water into their

mouths and on their faces. Gwen felt a rush of gratitude toward these strange nomadic creatures who had saved their lives.

Gwen closed her eyes again, lay her head back on the hard wood, as Krohn curled up beside her, and her head felt as if it weighed a million pounds. All was comfortably silent, no sound up here but that of the wind, and of the ropes creaking. She had traveled so far, for so long, and wondered when it all wound end. Soon they would be at the top, and she only prayed that the knights, whoever they were, were as hospitable as these nomads from the desert.

With each yank, the suns grew stronger, hotter, no shade under which to hide. She felt as if she were burning to a crisp, as if she were being hoisted to the center of the sun itself.

Gwendolyn opened her eyes as she felt a final jolt, and realized she'd fallen back asleep. She felt movement and she realized she was being carried gingerly by the nomads, all placing her and her people back on the canvas tarps and carrying them off the platform and onto the parapets. Gwendolyn felt herself finally placed down, gently, onto a stone floor, and she looked up and blinked several times into the sun. She was too exhausted to lift her neck, not sure whether she was still awake or dreaming.

Coming into view were dozens of knights, approaching her, dressed in immaculate shiny plate and chain mail, crowding around her and looking down at her in curiosity. Gwen could not understand how knights could be out here in this great desert, in this vast waste in the middle of nowhere, how they could be standing guard at the top of this immense ridge, beneath these suns. How did they survive out here? What were they guarding? Where did they get such regal armor? Was this all a dream?

Even the Ring, with its ancient tradition of grandeur, had little armor to match what these men wore. It was the most intricate armor she'd ever laid eye upon, forged of silver and platinum and some other metal she could not recognize, etched with intricate markings, and with weaponry to match. These men were clearly professional soldiers. It reminded her of the days when she was a young girl and accompanied her father onto the field; he would show her the soldiers, and she would look up and see them lined up with such splendor. Gwen had wondered how such beauty could exist, how it could even be possible. Perhaps she had died and this was her version of heaven.

But then she heard one of them step forward, out in front of the others, remove his helmet and look down at, his bright blue eyes filled with wisdom and compassion. Perhaps in his thirties, he had a startling appearance, his head stark bald, and wearing a light blond beard. Clearly, he was the officer in charge.

The knight turned his attention to the nomads.

“Are they alive?” he asked.

One of the nomads, in response, reached out with his long staff and gently prodded Gwendolyn, who shifted as he did. She wanted more than anything to sit up, to talk to them, to find out who they were—but she was too exhausted, her throat too dry, to respond.

“Incredible,” said another knight, stepping forward, his spurs jingling, as more and more knights stepped forward and crowded all around them. Clearly, they were all objects of curiosity.

“It’s not possible,” said one. “How could they have survived the Great Waste?”

“They couldn’t,” said another. “They must be deserters. They must have somehow breached the Ridge, got lost in the desert, and decided to come back.”

Gwendolyn tried to answer, to tell them everything that happened, but she was too exhausted to get the words out.

After a short silence, the leader stepped forward.

“No,” said, confidently. “Look at the markings on his armor,” he said, prodding Kendrick with his foot. “This is not our armor. It’s not Empire armor, either.”

All the knights crowded around, stunned.

“Then where are they from?” one asked, clearly baffled.

“And how did they know where to find us?” asked another.

The leader turned to the nomads.

“Where did you find them?” he asked.

The nomads squeaked back in return, and Gwen saw the leader’s eyes widen.

“On the other side of the sand wall?” he asked them. “Are you certain?”

The nomads squeaked back.

The commander turned to his people.

“I don’t think they knew we were here. I think they got lucky—the nomads found them and wanted their price and brought them here, mistaking them for one of us.”

The knights looked at each other, and it was clear they’d never encountered a situation like this before.

“We can’t take them in,” said one of the knights. “You know the rules. You let them in and we leave a trail. No trails. Ever. We have to send them back, into the Great Waste.”

A long silence ensued, interrupted by nothing but the howling of the wind, and Gwen could sense that they were debating what to do with them. She did not like how long the pause was.

Gwen tried to sit up in protest, to tell them that they couldn’t send them back out there, they just couldn’t. Not after all they’d been through.

“If we did,” the leader said, “it would mean their deaths. And our code of honor demands we help the helpless.”

“And yet if we take them in,” a knight countered, “then we could all die. The Empire will follow their trail. They will discover our hiding place. We would be endangering all of our people. Would you rather a few strangers die, or all of our people?”

Gwen could see their leader thinking, torn with anguish, facing a hard decision. She understood what it felt like to face hard decisions. She was too weak to resign herself to anything but to allow herself to be at the mercy of other people’s kindness.

“It may be so,” their leader finally said, resignation in his voice, “but I shall not turn away innocent people to die. They are coming in.”

He turned to his men.

“Bring them down on the other side,” he commanded, his voice firm with authority. “We shall bring them to our King, and he shall decide for himself.”

The men listened and began to break into action, preparing the platform on the other side for the descent, and one of his men stared back at their leader, uncertain.

“You are violating the King’s laws,” the knight said. “No outsiders are allowed into the Ridge. Ever.”

The leader stared back firmly.

“No outsiders have ever reached our gates,” he replied.

“The King may imprison you for this,” the knight said.

The leader did not waver.

“That is a chance I’m prepared to take.”

“For strangers? Worthless desert nomads?” the knight said, surprised. “Who knows who these people even are.”

“Every life is precious,” the leader countered, “and my honor is worth a thousand lifetimes in prison.”

The leader nodded to his men, who all stood there waiting, and Gwen suddenly felt herself lifted into the arms of a knight, his metal armor against her back. He picked her up effortlessly, as if she were a feather, and carried her, as the knights carried all the others. Gwen saw they were walking across a wide, flat stone landing atop the mountain ridge, spanning perhaps a hundred yards wide. They walked and walked, and she felt at ease in the arms of this knight, more at ease than she had in a long time. She wanted more than anything to say thank you, but she was too exhausted to even open her mouth.

They reached the other side of the parapets and as the knights prepared to place them on a new platform and lower them down the other side of the ridge, Gwen looked out and caught a glimpse of where they were going. It was a sight she would never, ever forget, a

sight that took her breath away. The mountain ridge, rising out of the desert like a sphinx, was, she saw, shaped in a huge circle, so wide it disappeared from view in the midst of the clouds. It was a protective wall, she realized, and on its other side, down below, Gwen saw a glistening blue lake as wide as an ocean, sparkly in the desert suns. The richness of the blue, the sight of all that water, took her breath away.

And beyond that, on the horizon, she saw a vast land, a land so vast she could not see where it ended, and to her shock, it was a fertile, fertile green, a green glowing with life. As far as she could see there stretched farms and fruit trees and forests and vineyards and orchards in abundance, a land overflowing with life. It was the most idyllic and beautiful sight she had ever seen.

“Welcome, my lady,” their leader said, “to the land beyond the ridge.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Godfrey, curled up in a ball, was awakened by a steady, persistent moaning interfering with his dreams. He woke slowly, unsure if he was really awake or still stuck in his endless nightmare. He blinked in the dim light, trying to shake off his dream. He had dreamt of himself as a puppet on a string, dangling over the walls of Volusia, being held by the Finians, who'd yanked the strings up and down, moving Godfrey's arms and legs as he dangled over the entrance to the city. Godfrey had been made to watch as below him thousands of his countrymen were butchered before his eyes, the streets of Volusia running red with blood. Each time he thought it was over, the Finian yanked on his strings again, pulling him up and down, over and over and over….

Finally, mercifully, Godfrey was awakened by this moaning, and he rolled over, his head splitting, to see it was coming from a few feet away, from Akorth and Fulton, the two of them curled up on the floor beside him, each moaning, covered in black and blue marks. Nearby were Merek and Ario, sprawled out unmoving on the stone floor, too —which Godfrey immediately recognized as the floor of a prison cell. All looked badly beaten—yet at least they were all here, and from what Godfrey could tell, they were all breathing.

Godfrey was once at once relieved and distraught. He was amazed to be alive, after the ambush he'd witnessed, amazed he had not been slaughtered by the Finians back there. Yet at the same time, he felt hollow, oppressed by guilt, knowing it was all his fault that Darius and the others had fallen into the trap inside the gates of Volusia. It was all because of his naïveté. How could he have been so stupid as to trust the Finians?

Godfrey closed his eyes and shook his head, willing for the memory to go away, for the night to have gone differently. He had led Darius and the others into the city unwittingly, like lambs to slaughter. Again and again in his mind he heard the screams of those men, trying to fight for their lives, trying to escape, echoing in his brain and leaving him no peace.

Godfrey clutched his ears and tried to make it go away, and trying to drown out Akorth and Fulton's moaning, both of them clearly in pain from all their bruises and from a night sleeping on a hard stone floor.

Godfrey sat up, his head feeling like a million pounds, and took in all his surroundings, a small prison cell containing just him and his friends and a few others he did not know, and he took some solace in the fact that, given how grim this cell looked, death might be coming

for them sooner rather than later. This jail was clearly different from the last one, feeling more like a holding cell for those about to die.

Godfrey heard, somewhere far away, the screams of a prisoner being dragged away down a hall, and he realized: this place really was a holding pen—for executions. He had heard of other executions in Volusia, and he knew that he and the others would be dragged outside at first light and become sport for the arena, so that its good citizens could watch them get torn to death by the Razifs, before the real gladiator games began. That was why they'd kept them alive this long. At least now it all made sense.

Godfrey scrambled to his hands and knees, reaching out and prodding each of his friends, trying to rouse them. His head was spinning, he ached from every corner of his body, covered in lumps and bruises, and it hurt to move. His last memory was of a soldier knocking him out, and he realized he must have been pummeled by them after he was down. The Finians, those treacherous cowards, clearly didn't have it in them to kill him themselves.

Godfrey clutched his forehead, amazed that it could hurt so much without even having a drink. He gained his feet unsteadily, knees wobbling, and looked about the dark cell. A single guard stood outside the bars, his back to him, barely watching. And yet these cells were made with substantial locks and thick iron bars, and Godfrey knew there would be no easy escape this time. This time, they were in until the death.

Slowly, beside him, Akorth, Fulton, Ario, and Merek gained their feet and they all studied their surroundings, too. He could see the puzzlement and fear in their eyes—and then the regret, as they began to remember.

"Did they all die?" Ario asked, looking at Godfrey.

Godfrey felt a pain in his stomach as he slowly nodded back.

"It's our fault," Merek said. "We let them down."

"Yes, it is," Godfrey replied, his voice breaking.

"I told you not to trust the Finians," Akorth said.

"The question is not whose fault it is," Ario said, "but what we are going to do about it. Are we going to let all of our brothers and sisters die in vain? Or are we going to gain vengeance?"

Godfrey could see the seriousness in young Ario's face and he was impressed by his steely determination, even while imprisoned and about to be killed.

"Vengeance?" Akorth asked. "Are you mad? We are locked beneath the earth, guarded by iron bars and Empire guards. All of our men are dead. We're in the midst of a hostile city and a hostile army. All of our gold is gone. Our plans are ruined. What possible vengeance can we take?"

“There’s always a way,” Ario said, determined. He turned to Merek.

All eyes turned to Merek, and he furrowed his brow.

“I am no expert on vengeance,” Merek said. “I kill men as they bother me. I do not wait.”

“But you are a master thief,” Ario said. “You’ve spent your whole life in a prison cell, as you admit. Surely you can get us out of this?”

Merek turned and surveyed the cell, the bars, the windows, keys, the guards—all of it—with an expert’s keen eye. He took it all in, then looked back at them grimly.

“This is no common prison cell,” he said. “It must be a Finian cell. Very expensive craftsmanship. I see no weak points, no way out, as much as I would wish to tell you otherwise.”

Godfrey, feeling overwhelmed, trying to shut out the screams of the other prisoners down the hall, walked to the prison cell door, pressed his forehead against the cool and heavy iron, and closed his eyes.

“Bring him here!” boomed a voice from down the stone hall.

Godfrey opened his eyes, turned his head, and looked down the hall to see several Empire guards dragging a prisoner. This prisoner wore a red sash over his shoulder, across his chest, and he hung limply in their arms, not even trying to resist. In fact, as he got closer, Godfrey saw that they had to drag him, as he was unconscious. Something was clearly wrong with him.

“Bringing me another plague victim?” the guard yelled back derisively. “What do you expect me to do with him?”

“Not our problem!” called back the others.

The guard on duty had a fearful look as he held up his hands.

“I’m not touching him!” he said. “Put him over there—in the pit, with the other plague victims.”

The guards looked at him questioningly.

“But he’s not dead yet,” they replied.

The guard on duty scowled.

“You think I care?”

The guards exchanged a look then did as they were told, dragging him across the prison corridor and throwing him into a large pit. Godfrey could see now that the pit was filled with bodies, all of them covered with the same red sash.

“And what if he tries to run?” the guards asked before turning away.

The commanding guard smiled a cruel smile.

“Do you not know what the plague does to a man?” he asked. “He’ll be dead by morning.”

The two guards turned and walked away, and Godfrey looked at

the plague victim, lying there all alone in that unguarded pit, and he suddenly had an idea. It was crazy enough that it might just work.

Godfrey turned to Akorth and Fulton.

"Punch me," he said.

They exchanged a puzzled look.

"I said punch me!" Godfrey said.

They shook their heads.

"Are you mad?" Akorth asked.

"I'm not going to punch you," Fulton chimed in, "as much as you may deserve it."

"I'm telling you to punch me!" Godfrey demanded. "Hard. In the face. Break my nose! NOW!"

But Akorth and Fulton turned away.

"You've lost it," they said.

Godfrey turned to Merek and Ario, but they, too, backed away.

"Whatever this is about," Merek said, "I want no part of it."

Suddenly, one of the other prisoners in the cell waltzed up to Godfrey.

"Couldn't help overhearing," he said, grinning a gap-toothed grin, breathing stale breath all over him. "I'm more than happy to punch you, just to shut you the hell up! You don't have to ask me twice."

The prisoner swung, connected right on Godfrey's nose with his bony knuckles, and Godfrey felt a sharp pain shooting through his skull as he cried out and grabbed his nose. Blood squirted out all over his face and down his shirt. The pain stung his eyes, clouding his vision.

"Now I need that sash," Godfrey said, turning to Merek. "Can you get it for me?"

Merek, puzzled, followed his line of vision across the hall, to the prisoner lying unconscious in the pit.

"Why?" he asked.

"Just do it," Godfrey said.

Merek furrowed his brow.

"If I tied something together, maybe I could reach it," he said. "Something long and skinny."

Merek reached up, felt his own collar, and extracted a wire from it; as he unfolded it, it was long enough to suit his purpose.

Merek leaned forward against the prison bars, careful so as not to alert the guard, and reached out with the wire, trying to hook the sash. It dragged in the dirt, but fell a few inches short.

He tried again and again, but Merek kept getting stuck at the elbow in the bars. They were not skinny enough.

The guard turned his way, and Merek quickly retracted it before he could see it.

“Let me try,” Ario said, stepping forward as the guard turned away.

Ario grabbed the long wire and stuck his arms through the cell, and his arms, much skinnier, passed through all the way up to the shoulder.

That extra six inches was what they needed. The hook just barely connected with the end of the red sash, and Ario began to pull it toward him. He stopped as the guard, facing the other direction, nodding off, lifted his head and looked around. They all waited, sweating, praying the guard did not look their way. They waited for what felt like an eternity, until finally the guard began nodding off again.

Ario pulled the sash closer and closer, sliding it across the prison floor, until finally it came through the bars and into the cell.

Godfrey reached out and put the sash on, and they all backed away from him, fearful.

“What on earth are you doing?” Merek asked. “The sash is covered with plague. You can infect us all.”

The other prisoners in the cell backed up, too.

Godfrey turned to Merek.

“I’m going to start coughing, and I’m not going to stop,” he said, wearing the sash, an idea hardening in his mind. “When the guard comes, he’ll see my blood and this sash, and you’ll tell him I have the plague, that they made a mistake in not separating me.”

Godfrey wasted no time. He began coughing violently, taking the blood on his face and rubbing it all up and down himself to make it look worse. He coughed louder than he’d ever had, until finally, he heard the cell door open and heard the guard walking in.

“Get your friend to shut up,” the guard said. “Do you understand?”

“He is not a friend,” Merek replied. “Just a man we met. A man who has the plague.”

The guard, baffled, looked down and noticed the red sash and his eyes widened.

“How did he get in here?” the guard asked. “He should’ve been separated.”

Godfrey coughed more and more, his entire body racked in a coughing fit.

He soon felt rough hands grab him and drag him out, shoving him. He stumbled across the hall, and with one last shove, he was thrown into the pit with the plague victims.

Godfrey lay on top of the infected body, trying not to breathe too loudly, trying to turn his head away, and not breathe in the man’s disease. He prayed to God he didn’t get it. It would be a long night,

lying here.

But he was unguarded now. And when it was light, he would rise. And he would strike.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Thorgrin felt himself plunging to the bottom of the ocean, the pressure building in his ears as he sank in the icy water, feeling as if he were being stabbed by a million daggers. Yet as he plunged deeper, the strangest thing happened: the light did not get darker, but brighter. As he flailed, sinking, dragged down by the weight of the sea, he looked down and was shocked to see, in a cloud of light, the last person he'd expected to see here: his mother. She smiled up at him, the light so intense he could barely see her face, and she reached out to him with loving arms as he sank, heading right for her.

"My son," she said, her voice crystal clear despite the waters. "I am here with you. I love you. It is not your time yet. Be strong. You have passed the test, yet there are many more to come. Face the world and never forget who you are. Never forget: your power comes not from your weaponry, but from inside you."

Thorgrin opened his mouth to answer back, but as he did, he found himself engulfed by water, swallowing, drowning.

Thor woke with a start, looking all around, wondering where he was. He felt a rough material on his wrists and realized he was bound, his hands behind his back, against a wooden pole. He looked around the dim hold, felt the rocking motion, and he knew at once he was on a ship. He could tell by the way his body moved, by the slats of light coming in, by the moldy smell of men trapped below deck.

Thorgrin looked about, immediately on guard, feeling weak, and trying to remember. The last thing he remembered was that awful storm, the shipwreck, he and his men tumbling from the boat. He remembered Angel, remembered clutching onto her for dear life, and he remembered the sword in his belt, the Sword of the Dead. How had he survived?

Thor looked all around, wondering how he was sailing at sea, confused, looking desperately for his brothers, and for Angel. He felt relieved as he made out shapes in the darkness, and saw them all nearby, bound with ropes to the posts: Reece and Selese, Elden and Indra, Matus, O'Connor, and a few feet away from them, Angel. Thor was elated to see they were all alive, though they all looked exhausted, beaten down from the storm and from the pirates.

Thor heard raucous laughter, arguing, cheering from somewhere up above, and then what sounded like explosions in his ears as men tumbled over each other on the hollow deck, and he remembered: the pirates. Those mercenaries who tried to sink him into the sea.

He would recognize that sound anywhere, the sound of crude individuals, bored at sea, out for cruelty—he had encountered too

many of them before. He realized, shaking off his dream, that he was their prisoner now, and he struggled at his cords, trying to break free.

But he could not. His arms had been bound well, as were his ankles. He was not going anywhere.

Thorgrin closed his eyes, trying to summon his power from deep within, the power he knew could move mountains if he chose.

But nothing came. He was too spent from the ordeal of the shipwreck, his strength still too low. He knew from past experience that he needed time to recover. Time, he knew, that he did not have.

"Thorgrin!" came a relieved voice, cutting through the darkness. It was a voice he recognized well, and he looked over to see Reece, bound a few feet away, looking back at him with joy. "You live!" Reece added.

"We did not know if you would come through!"

Thor turned to see O'Connor bound on his other side, equally joyful.

"I prayed for you every minute," came a sweet, soft voice in the darkness.

Thor looked over to see Angel, tears of joy in her eyes, and he could feel how much she cared for him.

"You owe her your life, you know," Indra said. "When they cut you loose, it was she who dove in and brought you back. Without her courage you would not be sitting here right now."

Thor looked at Angel with a new respect, and a new feeling of gratitude and devotion.

"Little one, I shall find a way to repay you," he said to her.

"You already have," she said, and he could see how much she meant it.

"Repay her by getting us all out of here," Indra said, struggling against her binds, irritated. "Those bloodsucking pirates are the lowest of the low. They found us floating at sea and bound us all while we were still unconscious from that storm. If they'd faced us man to man, it would be a very different story."

"They are cowards," Matus said. "Like all pirates."

"They also stripped us of our weapons," O'Connor added.

Thor's heart skipped a beat as he suddenly recalled his weapons, his armor, the Sword of the Dead.

"Don't worry," Reece said, seeing his face. "Our weaponry made it through the storm—including yours. It is not at the bottom of the sea, at least. But the pirates have it. See there, through the slats?"

Thor peered through the slats and saw, on the deck, all of their weapons, laid out beneath the sun, the pirates crowding around them. He saw Elden's battle-ax and O'Connor's golden bow and Reece's halberd and Matus's flail and Indra's spear and Selese's sack of sand—

and his very own Sword of the Dead. He saw the pirates, hands on their hips, looking down and examining them with glee.

"I never seen a sword like that," one of them said to the other.

Thor reddened with rage as he saw the pirate prodding his sword with his foot.

"Looks like it was a King's," said another, stepping forward.

"I found it first, it's mine," the first one said.

"If you kill me for it," said the other.

Thor watched the men tackle each other, then heard a loud thump as they both crashed down to the deck, wrestling, the other pirates jeering as they circled around. They rolled back and forth, punching and elbowing, the others egging them on, then finally Thor saw blood sprayed through the slats, saw one pirate stomp the other one's head several times.

The others cheered, relishing in it.

The pirate who won, a man with no shirt, a wiry torso, and a long scar down his chest, got up and, breathing hard, walked over to the Sword of the Dead. As Thor watched, he reached down and grabbed it and held it up victoriously. The others cheered.

Thor burned at the sight. This scum, holding his sword, a sword meant for a King. A sword he had risked his life to earn. A sword given to he, and no other.

There came a sudden shout, and Thor saw the pirate's face suddenly wince in agony. He cried out and threw the sword, as if holding a snake, and Thor saw it go flying through the air and land on the deck with a clang and a thud.

"It bit me!" the pirate yelled to the others. "The freaking sword bit my hand! Look!"

He held out his hand and displayed a missing finger. Thor looked over at the sword, its hilt visible through the slats, and saw small, sharp teeth protruding from one of the faces carved in it, blood running down it.

The other pirates turned and glanced at it.

"It's of the devil!" one yelled.

"I'm not touching it!" yelled another.

"Never mind it," said one, turning his back. "There are plenty of other weapons to choose from."

"What about my finger?" cried the pirate, in agony.

The other pirates laughed, ignoring him, and instead focused on going through the other weapons, fighting over the cache for themselves.

Thor returned his attention to his sword, seeing it now sitting there, so close to him, tantalizingly right on the other side of the slats. He tried once again with all his might to break free, but his cords

would not give. They had been tied well.

"If we could just get our weapons," Indra seethed. "I can't stand the sight of their greasy palms on my spear."

"Maybe I can help," Angel said.

Thor and the others turned to her skeptically.

"They didn't bind as they did you," she explained. "They were afraid of my leprosy. They tied my hands, but then they gave up. See?"

Angel stood, showing her wrists bound behind her back, but her feet free to walk.

"Little good it will do us," Indra said. "You're still locked down here with all of us."

Angel shook her head.

"You don't understand," she said. "I'm smaller than all of you. I can squeeze my body through those slats." She turned to Thor. "I can reach your sword."

He looked back at her, impressed by her fearlessness.

"You're very bold," he said. "I admire that about you. Yet you would endanger yourself. If they catch you out there, they may kill you."

"Or worse," Selese added.

Angel looked back, proud, insistent.

"I will die either way, Thorgrin," Angel replied. "I learned that a long time ago. My life taught me that. My disease taught me that. Dying does not matter to me; it is only living that matters. And living free, unrestrained from the bonds of men."

Thor looked back at her, inspired, amazed at her wisdom for such a young age. She already knew more about life than most of the great teachers he had met.

Thor nodded back at her solemnly. He could see the warrior spirit within her, and he would not restrain it.

"Go then," he said. "Be quick and quiet. If you see any sign of danger, return to us. I care more for you than that sword."

Angel brightened, encouraged. She turned quickly and hurried through the hold, walking awkwardly with her hands behind her back, until she reached the slats. She knelt there, looking out, sweating, eyes wide with fear.

Finally, seeing her chance, Angel stuck her head through a gap in the slats, just wide enough to hold her. She wiggled her way through it, pushing off with her feet.

A moment later, she disappeared from the hold, and Thor could see her, standing on the deck. His heart pounded as he prayed for her safety, prayed that she could get his sword and get back before it was too late.

Angel stood, crouched down and hurried quickly to the sword; she reached out with her bare foot, placed it on the hilt, and slid it over.

The sword made a loud noise as it slid across the deck, toward the hold. It was but a few inches away from the slats, when suddenly a voice cut through the air.

"The little creep!" a pirate yelled.

Thor saw all the pirates turn her way, then run to her.

Angel ran, trying to make it back—but they caught her before she could make it. They grabbed her and scooped her up, and Thor could see them marching her toward the rail, as if prepared to hurl her into the seas.

Angel managed to lift up the back of her heel hard and a groan rang out as she connected right between the pirate's legs. The pirate holding her moaned and dropped her, and without hesitating, Angel raced back across the deck, reached the sword, and kicked it.

Thor watched, exhilarated, as the sword slipped through the cracks and landed in the hold, right at his feet, with a bang.

There came a scream as one of the pirates backhanded Angel. The others scooped her up and carried her back for the rail, preparing to throw her into the sea.

Thor, sweating, having more fear for Angel than for himself, looked down at his sword and felt an intense connection to it. Their connection was so strong, Thor did not need to use his magical powers. He spoke to it, as he would to a friend, and he felt it listen.

"Come to me, my friend. Release my binds. Let us be together again."

The sword heeded his call. It suddenly lifted into the air, floated behind his back, and severed his ropes.

Thor immediately spun around, grabbed the hilt in midair, and brought the sword down, slashing the cords at his ankles.

He then jumped to his feet and slashed the cords binding all the others.

Thor turned and charged for the slats, raised his boot, and kicked off the wooden door. Shattered, it went flying into pieces as he burst out into sunlight, free, sword in hand—and determined to rescue Angel.

Thor sprinted onto the deck and charged for the men holding Angel, who squirmed in their arms, fear in her eyes as they reached the rail.

"Let her go!" Thor yelled.

Thor raced for her, cutting down the pirates who approached him from all sides, slashing them across the chest before they could even get a blow in—none of them a match for him and the Sword of the

Dead.

He cut through the group, kicked the final two men out of the way, then reached out and grabbed the back of the final pirate's shirt just before he dropped her over. He yanked him toward him, pulling Angel back over the edge, then twisted his arm so he dropped her. She landed safely on deck.

Thor then grabbed the man and hurled him over the edge. He plummeted into the icy seas, screaming.

Thor heard footsteps and turned to see dozens of pirates bearing down on him. This was not a small boat but a huge, professional ship, as large as any warship, and it contained at least a hundred pirates, all of them hardened, accustomed to a life of killing at sea. They all charged, clearly welcoming the fight.

Thor's Legion brothers poured out of the hold, each racing forward to reclaim their weapons before the pirates could reach them. Elden jumped out of the way as a pirate brought a machete down for his neck, then he grabbed him and headbutted him, breaking the pirate's nose. He snatched the machete from his hand and cut him in half. Then he leapt for his battle-ax.

Reese snatched his halberd, O'Connor his bow, Indra her spear, Matus his flail, and Selese her sack of sand, while Angel darted past them, kicking a pirate in the shin before he could throw a dagger at Thor. The pirate screamed and grabbed his leg, and the dagger went flying overboard.

Thor charged forward and leapt into the group, kicking one pirate in the chest and slashing another, then spinning around and slashing another's arm before he could bring his machete down on Reece. Another charged and swung a club for his head, and Thor ducked, the club whizzing by. He prepared to stab him, but Reece stepped forward and used his halberd to kill him.

O'Connor let loose two arrows which went whizzing by Thor, and Thor spun and watched two pirates, charging for his back, fall dead. He spotted a pirate charging for Angel and Thor was about to chase after him when O'Connor stepped up and put an arrow in his back.

Thor heard footsteps and spun to see a pirate charging for O'Connor's back with a club. Thor lunged and, feeling the Sword of the Dead vibrating, slashed his thick club in two then stabbed the pirate in the heart before he could reach him. Thor then spun around, kicked another man in the ribs, and, the Sword of the Dead leading the way, chopped off the man's head. Thor was amazed. It was as if the sword had a beating heart of its own, willing Thor on to what it wanted him to do.

As Thor slashed furiously in every direction, a dozen men piled up before him, he covered in blood up to his elbows—when suddenly,

a pirate jumped him from behind, landing on his back. The mercenary raised a dagger, bringing it down on the back of Thor's shoulder, and he was too close, and it was too late, for Thor to react.

Thor spotted an object in the air, hurling at him out of the corner of his eye, and he suddenly felt the man release his grip and drop down to the deck. Thor turned to see Angel standing there, having just thrown a stone, and realized she'd connected perfectly with the man's temple. The man squirmed at Thor's feet, and Thor watched, amazed, as Angel stepped forward, grabbed a hook off the deck, and raising it high, impaled it in the man's chest. It was the same hook the pirates had used to ensnare them in their net at sea. Justice, Thor realized, had come full circle.

He'd had no idea Angel had it in her; he saw the fierceness in her eyes as she stood over him and he realized she had a true warrior's spirit and was much more complex than he knew.

Thor turned and threw himself into the fray and he and his men attacked relentlessly, all of them banding together, as they had in so many places, a fine-tuned killing machine, all watching each other's backs. They fought beautifully together, knowing each other's rhythms. As Elden swung his battle-ax, Indra hurled her spear, killing those he could not reach. Matus swung his flail, killing two pirates at once, while Reece used his long halberd to kill three pirates before they could reach Selese. And Selese, in turn, sprinkled the dust from her sack on their wounds, healing all their wounds as they went and keeping them strong.

Slowly the tide turned, as they cut down one man after the next. The bodies piled high, and soon there remained but a dozen of them.

Eyes wide with fear, the dozen remaining pirates, realizing they could not win, dropped their daggers and machetes and axes and raised their hands, terrified.

"Don't kill us!" one yelled out, shaking. "We didn't mean it! We just went along with the others!"

"I'm sure you didn't," Elden said.

"Don't worry," Thor said, "we're not going to kill you."

Thor sheathed his sword, stepped forward, grabbed the pirate, lifted him over his head, and hurled him overboard, into the sea.

"The fish will do that for us."

The others joined him, driving the remaining few overboard with their weapons, into the sea, and Thor watched as the seas soon turned red, sharks circling and drowning out the cries of the pirates.

Thor turned to the others, who looked back at him. He could see in their eyes that they were thinking the same thing as he: victory, sweet victory, was theirs.

CHAPTER NINE

Erec bent over the rail and looked down in the torchlight into a sea filled with Empire corpses. A dozen Empire soldiers lay floating, all killed by Erec and his men, all pushed over the rail, and as he watched, slowly, one at a time, they sank.

Erec looked up and down his fleet of ships and saw his men on all of them, all now free, thanks to Alistair's breaking their bonds. The Empire had been foolish to leave but a dozen soldiers to guard each ship, thinking themselves invincible. They had been vastly outnumbered, and once Erec's men's bonds were broken, it had been easy to kill them and retake their ships. They had underestimated Alistair.

They also had no reason to fear an uprising because they had completely surrounded Erec's ships. Indeed, as Erec looked up he saw that the Empire blockade, with their thousand ships, was still intact. There was nowhere for them to go.

More horns sounded, more Empire soldiers cried out in the night, and Erec could see the lanterns being lit all up and down the fleet. The Empire, that sleeping dragon, was slowly rallying. Soon they would enclose Erec's men like a python and strangle them to death. This time, Erec was sure, they would show no mercy.

Erec thought quickly. He surveyed the Empire ships, looking for any weak spot in the blockade, a place with fewer ships. As he turned and looked behind him, he noticed a spot where the Empire ships were more spread out, spaced perhaps twenty yards apart. It was the weakest point of the circle—though, even so, the blockade was hardly weak. It was the best of the worst options. They had to make a run for it.

"FULL SAIL!" Erec shouted, and as he rushed into action, his orders were shouted and echoed up and down his fleet.

They hoisted the sails and began to row, Erec standing at the bow, his ship out front, his fleet close behind. He looked out ahead, aiming his ship for the weak point of the blockade. He only hoped that they could ram it quickly enough, before all the Empire ships closed in and tightened their positions. If they could only get through, then they would have open seas before them. He knew the Empire would follow closely, and that most likely it would be a chase he could not win.

Still, he had to try. Some plan, even a reckless plan, was better than conceding to defeat and death.

"Can we ram it?" came a voice.

Erec turned to see Strom coming up beside him, hand on his sword, still red with blood where he had killed the Empire soldiers,

peering into the night.

Erec shrugged.

“Have we a choice?” he replied.

Strom stared into the horizon beside him, unflinching.

“How long until they know we are coming?”

They received their answer as an arrow whizzed through the air, right past Erec and Strom, and found its target in one of Erec’s men, just a few feet behind them. The man screamed out and fell on his back, clutching the arrow in his chest, pulling at it with both hands, quivering on the floor as he was dying.

Another arrow whizzed through the air, then another, and another. Neither he nor Strom ducked, both standing fearlessly, holding their ground.

Erec looked out and made out shapes in the darkness, saw the Empire soldiers taking aim, lining up, firing rows of arrows, and he knew this was going to be bad. They still had a hundred yards to go until they reached the blockade.

“Shields!” Erec yelled out. “Get together! Stay close! Man to man!”

Erec’s men obeyed, falling into formations, raising their shields, and Erec, satisfied, did the same, kneeling beside Strom and others, and holding his shield overhead.

Erec felt three arrows land on it in three quick thuds, the vibrations shaking his arm.

Shouts cut through the night, and Erec heard a body plunge into the water; he turned and his heart sank to see the commander of one of his ships falling over the rail. The man plunged into the water, two arrows in his chest, and Erec could see the fear in his men’s eyes as the ship beside him was beginning to stray. Erec knew that without their commander the ship would not follow, and he would lose his men. A ship needed a commander—especially now.

“Strom!” he called out to his brother, frantic. “Can you make the swing if I get close enough?”

Strom looked back at his brother then out at the ship, and in an instant, he understood what Erec wanted. He nodded back with confidence, and without hesitating, he ran to the rail.

Erec ran to the wheel and steered his ship closer to the other, and as they got close enough, Strom, ignoring the arrows, stood on the rail. He raised his bow, quickly tied an arrow to a rope, aimed high, and fired.

The arrow, with rope attached, flew high in an arc over the mast of the ship, and looped around it.

Strom tugged at it, satisfied, then grabbed it and leapt into the air.

Strom sailed through the air, a good forty feet, swinging in an arc, until he finally reached the other ship, jumping down and tumbling on the deck, to the astonished looks of all the sailors on board.

Strom gained his feet and took the helm, and as he did, all the men, re-energized, fell in behind him.

"Forward!" Strom yelled out, taking charge. "We follow my brother!"

The men went back to their positions, taking up oars, hoisting sails, ignoring the arrows sailing down on them.

As Erec turned and faced the ships, getting ever closer, the sea of arrows thickened, and more of his men screamed out and fell over the rail. Erec knew something had to be done. He had to keep the Empire off guard or else risk losing too many of his men on the approach.

"Archers, take positions!" Erec called out.

His men did as commanded, and they followed suit on the other ships as well, Strom echoing his command.

"Fire!" Erec yelled.

His men sent back a volley of arrows at the Empire ships, and Erec was satisfied as he heard the shouts of dozens of Empire archers, high on their masts, falling down to the decks. Others fell over the rail, dropping into the sea, and finally, there came a lull in the arrows coming their way.

"Again!" Erec yelled, and his men sent another volley, narrowly avoiding arrows themselves as the Empire regrouped.

Back and forth the two sides went, volley after volley, men dying on both sides, and Erec's fleet, in the meanwhile, getting ever closer, narrowing the gap. He was now about fifty yards away, the arrows coming down heavily, and he set sail right for the hull of the closest Empire ship, preparing to ram it. Erec turned and looked back over his shoulder and he saw the greater Empire fleet beginning to rally, to head their way. He knew he hadn't much time. He had to ram this blockade, and their odds did not look good.

Desperate, Erec suddenly had an idea.

"Man the catapults!" Erec yelled. "Arm them with spears, and set the tips aflame! Now!"

Erec's command was echoed up and down the ranks of his fleet, and he watched with satisfaction as men placed flaming spears on catapults normally reserved for boulders. He wanted to fire, but knew he had to get closer, within range, to make sure this worked; he would have no second chance.

"Wait for it!" Erec yelled out, seeing the jittery faces of all his men, hands resting on the cords holding back the catapults. He knew they were all as anxious to fire as he, especially as more arrows showered down.

Finally, when they reached but thirty yards away, Erec yelled:

"FIRE!"

The Empire fleet realized, too late, what Erec's men were doing, and a split second before his men fired, he could see the terrified expressions of the commanders of their ships, as they scurried frantically to command their men to move their ships.

Erec watched as hundreds of spears, all aflame, sailed through the night air, cutting a blazing path, lighting up the black seas. One by one they landed on the sails, embedding themselves in the canvas, on the masts, on the wooden decks.

Within moments the Empire ships caught aflame. As their men scurried to put them out, some fires were dampened—but others spread wildly. It did some damage—but more importantly, it achieved Erec's goal: it occupied the Empire fleet, distracting them, and finally the barrage of arrows stopped.

"FULL SAIL!" Erec yelled.

Erec's men, on all his ships, raced back to the sails and oars, and Erec increased speed, taking aim for the closest ship, the only thing standing between them and freedom, an Empire ship half ablaze, its men shouting and struggling to put out the fires.

"Single file!" Erec shouted to the other ships. "Stay close behind me!"

Strom echoed his command and got in line behind Erec, and Erec watched with satisfaction as his fleet came in close behind him. He knew it was their only chance. He did not need to run the entire blockade; he just needed enough space to clear one ship. And then the others could follow on his heels.

He looked up and his heart pounded as the blockade came closer and closer, now hardly twenty yards away…then ten…then five. He knew the impact would be rough.

"BRACE YOURSELVES!" Erec yelled.

Erec grabbed the rail, bracing himself, too, as the ship bore down on them.

Erec was jolted, the entire ship shaking, as they smashed into the Empire ship at a sharp angle. Erec's entire ship rocked, as did the Empire ship, each rocking back and forth, and for a moment, Erec wondered if his ship would sink.

But a second later Erec felt movement, and he knew they had burst through. The Empire ship spun sharply, smashed out of the way, leaving just enough space to clear between the ships.

Erec, ship to ship with the Empire soldiers, so close he could look them in the face, knew that he had to strike first. He knew that if he tried to just sail right through, they would attack.

"CHARGE!" Erec yelled.

He wasted no time. He drew his sword, rushed forward and leapt from his deck onto the Empire ship beside him, all of his men letting out a battle cry and following close behind.

Erec led his men as they charged across the deck of the Empire ship, slashing Empire soldiers who turned his way, too late, still struggling to put out flames. Slowly, the Empire soldiers realized what was happening, and they turned their attention back to Erec and his men.

Erec charged through the flaming ship, narrowly avoiding the fires, as he fought Empire soldiers hand-to-hand. Their swords clanged in the night, sparks flying, as Erec slashed one large Empire soldier after another, all of them bigger than he, but none a match for his speed or skill. One large soldier brought his sword down, Erec blocked, then he swung around and cut him in two. The man fell, screaming, overboard.

Erec did what he did best, killing one, two, three soldiers at a time, none able to outfight him. No knight in the entire Ring had ever been able to best him, and these Empire soldiers, as fine as they were, were not of his caliber either. Empire soldiers fell by the handful, and Erec did not slow, racing through the ship from stern to bow, his men behind him, clearing the decks.

Erec saw with satisfaction that Strom was leading his own men to leap onto the Empire ship on the other side of the blockade. Like his big brother, Strom charged fearlessly through the other Empire ship, felling men left and right, moving like lightning. The Empire was caught off guard: after all, no Empire commander would ever imagine that these few ships would dare attack them.

Yet as Empire soldiers rallied they fought back fiercely, and with their superior armor and weaponry, they managed to kill dozens of Erec's and Strom's men. It was a bloody, fierce, hand-to-hand battle amidst the flames, and men's screams filled the night.

Erec saw the rest of the Empire fleet, each ship packed with soldiers closing in from the corner of his eye and he knew they were losing precious time. Soon they would be completely surrounded.

Erec knew he had to do something quickly. He quickly scanned the ship, spotted a huge metal anchor attached to a chain, sitting on deck, and he had an idea.

"The anchor!" Erec yelled out to Strom. "Destroy the hull!"

Erec ran to the anchor, grabbed its chain, swung it high above his head, and then brought it down, smashing the deck, wood shattering everywhere. A huge hole appeared right in the center of the deck, and Erec looked over to see Strom beginning to do the same. Erec's men ran over and helped, and together, they all swung the chain higher, faster, stronger, smashing the deck again and again, breaking it to

bits. Deeper and deeper the anchor went, to the lowest holds, until finally, ice-cold water came gushing straight up, like a geyser.

Erec heard the satisfying sound of the ship cracking in two, and he felt the massive ship begin to list.

"Back to our ship!" Erec yelled.

Erec's men all turned and ran across the deck and leapt back over the rail, onto their ship, right before the Empire ships began to sink. They took up the oars and continued forging ahead, right beside the ships on either side of them, which began to sink quickly. Strom, the damage done, escaped back to his ship, too.

Erec squeezed his ship between the boats, all his ships single file behind him, all of them firing back at the Empire soldiers in the greater fleet who were now closer and firing down on them. Some Empire soldiers even managed to jump from their ships onto Erec's fleet, and Erec's men rushed forward and killed them, one at a time. They were being harassed on all sides.

Yet they pushed forward and soon, with one final satisfying thunk, Erec broke through the blockade, past the last of the burning ships, and out to open seas.

Erec looked out and saw open seas before him, and for the first time, he felt relief. The entire Empire fleet might be rallying behind him, but at least now he had open seas, a chance to outrun them. For once, he felt like he could really make it.

And then, suddenly, Erec's heart froze as an awful sight appeared before him: there, coming around the bend, blocking their way again, were two of the largest Empire ships he'd ever seen, five times the size of the others, come from out of nowhere, and creating another definitive blockade.

Their exit was completely sealed.

And this time, they had no way out.

CHAPTER TEN

Darius stood in the circular dirt courtyard enclosed by high stone walls, its periphery lined with Empire guards, and he fought against his training partner until sweat stung his eyes. Back and forth they went, Darius swinging heavy clubs with both arms as his opponent, a slave of a race he did not recognize, with green skin and yellow pointy ears, twice as muscular as he and about his age, defended himself, wielding two shields. Darius brought down blow after blow of the clubs and his opponent blocked each one, the clanging of his shield ringing in the air as Darius drove him back across the ring.

All around the courtyard stood dozens of other slaves, among them Desmond, Raj, Kaz, and Luzi, all of them watching, egging them on.

Darius, breathing hard, was exhausted. He'd been sparring, as had the others, all day under the burning suns, each taking turns under the watchful eyes of the taskmasters. His shoulders ached from the effort, his entire body was drenched in sweat, and he did not know how much longer he could go on. If anyone dared to escape, as one unfortunate soul had tried earlier in the morning, the Empire soldiers were only too eager to step forward with their weapons forged of real steel, and put a sword through his heart.

Darius knew there was no escape—not now, anyway. The only way out was to do as they were told, to spar, to train, and to prepare for the arena.

There came another rumble and roar in the distance, from the direction of the arena, and Darius knew it was the crowd, eager for more gladiators, for more entertainment. Their bloodlust was insatiable.

There came on its heels an even louder shout, followed by a horn, and Darius knew what that meant: another gladiator had died somewhere beyond those walls. The crowd went crazy, but Darius and his men all slumped their shoulders, depressed at the thought. That was their fate, awaiting them soon enough.

He would face death soon enough—all of them would—and he tried not to think of it as he sparred fruitlessly beneath the sun. A part of him had tuned out, and no longer cared. After all, nearly everyone he had known and loved in the world was now dead, thanks to him. He felt absorbed by guilt, and a part of him wanted to die with them all, too. The only ones he did not know the fates of were his sister, Sandara, and his dog, Dray. He wondered if they were still alive, out there somewhere, if somehow they had survived. The last he had seen of his sister was when she's departed for the Great Waste, and the last

he'd seen his dog was when he was sticking his teeth into a soldier's throat. Darius closed his eyes, recalling the terrific blow the dog received by a soldier's club, remembering his whine as he fell to the ground, and praying that he somehow survived.

Darius felt a sudden jolt on the side of his head, the sound of metal ringing in his ears, and he went stumbling backwards, and realized his opponent had swung around with his shields and smashed him on the head.

Morg stepped between them, and the boys quieted.

"You lost your focus," Morg chided Darius. "When you do that in the arena, it won't be a shield on the side of your head but the blade of an ax."

Darius stood there, breathing hard, realizing he was right.

Morg faced the others.

"Do you see the mistake Darius made here today? If any of you lose concentration, if any of you go to some other place, it will be the last time you do. Not that I care if you all die—in fact, I look forward to it. But I don't want you dying early on me. That will make *me* look bad. People need entertainment, and if you fall early, I will pay for it. And I don't plan on paying for anything."

He surveyed the boys as a tense silence fell over them.

"If there are any of you unable or unwilling to fight, tell me now," he added, scanning their faces.

Darius looked over at the lineup of dozens of boys, and they all looked lost, forlorn, to him, faces fill with hardship, boys who had suffered, as he, had lived a life of labor and pain. They were faces that should not have looked as pained as they did at such a young age.

"I do not wish to fight!" one boy called out.

All eyes turned to him, a boy surprisingly larger and more muscular than the others, as he stepped forward and lowered his head.

"I wish to kill no one," the boy said. "I am a simple man. A farmer. I've never harmed anyone. And I do not wish to now."

Morg turned to him, grinning wide, and walked slowly over to him, his boots crunching in the courtyard. Morg, shirtless, legs covered in black armor, was an imposing figure, bigger even than this boy, and he stopped before him and looked him up and down as if he were nothing.

"You are very brave to admit your fears," Morg said, "to tell me how you feel. I thank you for it. I understand you do not wish to fight —and I can help you."

The boy looked up at him hopefully and Morg stepped forward, reached down, and pulled a small dagger from his belt. Darius noticed it too late, and he tried to cry out, to lunge forward.

But there was no time. In one quick motion, he stepped forward,

grabbed the boy by the back of his neck, and plunged it into his heart, holding him tight.

The boy cried out in agony, but Morg held him tight, squeezing the knife into his chest, holding him face-to-face, staring him down. The boy's eyes froze wide open, until he finally froze and slumped down.

Morg dropped him limply to the ground, at his feet. He lay there, his red blood staining the sand red.

"See?" Morg said down to the dead boy. "Now you need not fight!"

Morg looked up and slowly scanned the faces of the others boys; they all looked down at the dead boy, terror in their eyes. Darius himself felt a burning rage, felt like killing Morg.

"NO!" Darius shouted, unable to help himself.

He lunged forward, prepared to pummel the man to death, but he hardly got a few feet when several soldiers stepped forward, in full armor, and blocked his path with their halberds.

Morg merely grinned. He turned and looked over all the other boys, who now stared back at him, this time in fear.

"Are there any other of you who do not wish to fight?" he asked. "Any others who do not wish to inflict harm on others? Any others who are afraid?"

All the boys stood there, silent this time, none willing to step forward or say a word.

Morg nodded with satisfaction.

"The arena is not for the meek and the fearful; it is not for those who are unsure if they can fight, or who are not prepared to kill others. I will not have my gladiators embarrass me before the Empire. You, step forward," he said, pointing to one of the smaller captives.

The small boy stepped forward, and Morg turned and nodded to another boy, a muscular brute with reddish skin, and evil-looking, narrow eyes, a pockmarked face, and long braided hair down his back.

"Drok," Morg said. "Come forward."

Drok, narrowing his eyes in meanness, stepped forward and gazed on the smaller boy like a lion wanting to devour its prey. Darius could see the darkness in Drok's narrow eyes as he stared down at the small boy. He could sense that he was a hardened killer.

Morg nodded and one of his soldiers threw a club to Drok, and another to the boy. The boy fumbled and dropped his, while Drok caught his effortlessly and spun around to face the boy with relish.

Drok charged, not waiting, and as the smaller boy fumbled to grasp his club, Drok brought his own club down with such force that he snapped the small boy's club in half.

In the same motion Drok swung backwards and smashed the boy

across the jaw, spinning his head way around and sending him to the ground, face-first in the dirt.

The boy lay there, unmoving, blood pouring from his mouth.

Morg stepped forward over the boy and stared down disapprovingly.

"You would waste our time in the arena," he said to the unmoving boy. "The arena is not for the weak—or the clumsy."

Morg nodded to Drok, and he stepped forward, raised the club high overhead, and began to bring it down for the boy's skull.

Darius realized, again too late, what was happening.

"NO!"

Darius brushed aside his captors and rushed forward.

But not in time. Drok brought his club down, smashing the boy's skull, killing him on the spot.

Darius felt sick to his stomach as he looked down at the boy lying in a pool of blood.

Darius, enraged, let out a guttural cry, charged forward, and tackled Drok, driving him back and landing hard on the ground.

The other boys gathered around and cheered for a fight, as Darius tumbled with him in a cloud of dust. Drok was nearly twice Darius's size, wiry, all-muscle, not an ounce of fat on him, and he was slick, covered in sweat. It was hard for Darius to grab hold of him as they rolled around, caked in dirt and blood.

Drok managed to get atop Darius and he brought his thumbs down to gouge out Darius's eyes. Darius caught them midair and held them back—but then Drok pulled back and tried to bite off Darius's fingers. Darius yanked his hands away, and Drok brought his forehead down and head-butted Darius in the face.

Darius fell back to the ground, his world spinning, and saw Drok reaching down to gouge out his eyes again. Darius leaned back, wheeled his elbow around, and connected with Drok's jaw.

Drok spun off him, landing in the dirt beside him, and Darius, enraged on behalf of those other boys, punched him in the face, again and again—until finally he felt several strong hands pulling him back.

On his feet, yanked back by several Empire soldiers, Darius watched Morg approach. He examined Darius, seeming impressed.

"Your instincts are strong," he said. "You would make a fine fighter indeed—except for your pity. Hold onto that pity, and it will be the death of you. Have no compassion for those weaker than you, for those killed unfairly. There is no room for pity in the arena. There is room only for victory."

Morg turned back to the group of boys, as if looking for more to weed out, and this time, his eyes stopped on Luzi. Darius could see what he was thinking: Luzi was smaller than all the others, and he

wanted to weed him out, too.

"You two," he said to two large boys, "fight that boy."

Luzi looked out at Darius, nervous, as he stepped forward and was forced to face the two large boys, each given clubs. He looked terrified.

Darius shook off the soldier's grip and ran between Luzi and the boys.

"If you want to fight him, you have to go through me," Darius said to them.

They both looked at each other nervously after seeing his last performance, clearly neither wanting to fight him.

"Fight him," Morg urged. "Or I will kill you myself."

The two boys rushed forward for Darius, who was unarmed, and as the first boy swung a club for his head, Darius ducked, reached around, and punched him in the kidney. He keeled over, immobile.

The other boy swung for Darius's side, but Darius rolled out of the way and at the same time, he swept the boy's legs out from under him, knocking him to his back, then spun around and elbowed him in the face, keeping him down.

The two boys lay on the ground, unmoving, and Darius regained his feet and stared defiantly back at Morg.

Morg stared back, enraged.

"Send anyone else against Luzi," Darius seethed, "and they will have to go through me. I will kill them with my own hands if I have to."

Morg stood there, clearly enraged, debating what to do, looking back and forth between Darius and Luzi.

Finally, he spit on the floor.

"Let him die out there then," he snapped. "It's one more death for the spectators. And the killing time has come."

With that, Morg turned and strutted across the courtyard, his men falling in behind him, and Darius and the others soon felt themselves shackled, back in a chain gang, led across the dusty courtyard. Up ahead a massive iron cell door opened, leading into a narrow stone tunnel, and as it did, Darius heard the cheers. It was the sound of a crowd, the largest crowd he'd ever heard, out for blood, and getting louder and louder.

The time had come, he knew, to enter the arena.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Volusia watched in surprise as hundreds of thousands of Empire soldiers poured out, charging right for her, preparing to engage her in the biggest battle she had ever experienced. They came at her from all sides, streaming around the capital walls from both sides. They also poured through the golden capital doors, opening wider and wider, as the Empire men let out a great cry. It seemed as if the gates of hell themselves were opening to attack her. She had never seen so many men.

Volusia was surprised and disappointed that the Voks sorcery had been unable to take down the capital walls, surprised to find their powers useless against these fortifications, and she had no choice now but to brace herself for conventional warfare—her two hundred thousand men up against an army two or three times the size.

Volusia checked back over her shoulder and was relieved to see that her men held their formations, well disciplined, and that they all charged forward, as she had commanded, to fearlessly meet the enemy.

As the men closed in on her, now hardly a hundred yards away and gaining speed, one of her advisors came up beside her.

"Goddess, you must retreat," he said, fear in his voice as he yanked her arm. "You will die here. You must retreat at once to the rear lines."

Volusia shook off his arm and stood her ground, facing the Empire army defiantly. After all, she was a goddess. She felt that she was. She was invincible. And no man, nothing of this earth, could harm her.

"If they are to fight my men, they will fight me first," she replied. "They will have to go through me."

Volusia stood there as horns and trumpets sounded, as Empire soldiers on massive horses, flying banners, bore down on her. She looked up and saw, high above, the Empire general, looking down, clearly enjoying himself, satisfied that he was about to witness a bloody slaughter.

Volusia, though, was unafraid. In fact, she relished the confrontation. She had enjoyed violence her entire life, and this, she felt, was no different.

"Fork into three divisions!" she commanded, her voice booming over the din of the galloping horses. "One fork left, one right, and one in the middle with me!"

Her army, well-disciplined, did as she commanded, dispersing into three units, charging to meet each of the three empire battalions.

A huge caravan of horses charged right for her, over the golden bridge, and before them, in the vanguard, charged thousands of soldiers on foot, with their long black-and-gold axes held high, gleaming in the sun.

Volusia knew she did not have the manpower of these soldiers. But she had unshakable belief in herself: she simply could not see herself dying. And what she could not see, she knew could not come to pass.

They came closer and closer, and Volusia stood there and braced herself as the first of the men reached her, screaming, battle-ax raised to the sky, gleaming as he brought it down for her forehead.

Volusia waited till the last moment, till the swinging blade nearly touched her face, standing perfectly still, then she reached up and drove the small concealed blade attached to her palm right up and into the soldier's throat. She kept driving it, all the way, embedding it in the man's throat, until he gurgled blood, dropped his ax, dropped to his knees, and collapsed to his face, dead.

The first casualty of this war was hers, and Volusia could not be more thrilled. As more men reached her, on all sides now, she turned and spun, using her small blade to slash one throat after another. She did not need strength or size when she had dexterity and cunning; the smallest weapon, she knew, from the smallest person, could sometimes be the deadliest of all.

There came a tremendous clang of armor and weaponry, of men shouting, as the armies all finally met in the middle, in one great clash of battle. The two sides met in an explosion of energy, swords meeting shields, axes and maces and halberds and spears meeting armor, limbs lost, men dying on both sides as they came together. The fighting was intense and fierce, man to man, shoulder to shoulder, neither side giving an inch. They pushed into each other's lines, their momentum carrying them, and a back-and-forth ensued, the lines ebbing and flowing in both directions.

Volusia's men, to their credit, did not yield to fear, held their ground like a stone wall, even in the face of the charging armies. Maltolis's men were well-disciplined; that's what years training beneath a madman would get you.

The Empire armies, Volusia could see, had expected their momentum to carry them, had expected to run her men over in a tidal wave, or had expected them to retreat. But none of the above had happened, and this, her men staunchly standing their ground, had created a bottleneck effect that began to work in Volusia's favor. Soon the Empire men were backed up, all the way to the capital, only so many able to pass through the capital gates at one time with her men keeping them at a standstill. Despite their greater numbers, it kept the

two sides even.

At the flanks of the battle, though, it was a different story: there, in the open field, the momentum of the Empire's greater numbers carried them forward, and they kept pouring in, one battalion after the next, overwhelming her forces. Her men put up a gallant fight, killing scores of Empire—but the Empire had an endless supply of men, and for the Empire, men were cheap. It did not take Volusia long to realize that her men were being overpowered at the flanks. Bodies were piling up fast on the desert floor, and she knew she had to do something quickly or else risk being surrounded.

Volusia heard a sudden crash and felt the earth rock beneath her, sending her stumbling. She heard men scream out and she looked over to see a huge boulder had landed on the ground a few feet away from her, leaving a big crater in the ground and crushing several of her men. It killed some Empire men, too, but the Empire did not seem to care.

Volusia looked up and saw the Empire general standing atop the city parapets, grinning down in satisfaction. She saw dozens more boulders being tipped to the edge of the parapets, balancing precariously, about to be rolled down.

Volusia watched in horror as the boulders began to fall, one after the other, the ground shaking and rocking at the explosions all around her. Massive clouds of dust rose in the air as men cried out in agony. Her men fell left and right, and Volusia knew at once that it was not just the boulders that were deadly, but the psychological impact of these weapons being hurled at them.

She knew they would lose this battle if something were not done, and fast.

Volusia, finishing slicing another Empire soldier's throat, looked up and braced herself as she spotted several Empire soldiers barreling down for her. They all had her in their sights and she knew she could not evade them this time. She raised her hands to her face as the axes came down, knowing there was nothing more she could do and prepared to meet her fate.

Vokian stepped forward beside her and held out a palm, and as he did a light-green bubble formed around her; their axes came down for her head and bounced off it harmlessly, one after the next after the next.

Volusia stood there, grateful to be alive as the soldiers could not touch her. They swung again and again, fruitlessly.

Volusia stepped forward and with her dagger stabbed one of them in the heart, dragging it along his chest until she cut out his heart. She reached in barehanded and pulled it out, and relished the moment as the man fell screaming to the ground, Volusia holding his still beating

heart in her hand.

"I am the Goddess Volusia," she said calmly down to the dying soldier.

Volusia turned to Vokin, knowing something must be done.

"If you cannot topple the walls," she cried out to him over the din, "then cast me another spell. Hurt them another way."

He looked at her knowingly, and he turned and nodded to his army of green Voks. As one, they stepped forward and raised their palms.

Green orbs of light came flying out, aimed low, at the desert floor, and as they impacted, the desert floor began to crack and split open. Crevices appeared, widening, and soon they were twenty feet wide, between Volusia's army and the onslaught of Empire soldiers.

The Empire forces, still charging forward, went tumbling, horse and man, into the trenches. Men cried out as they went down and were smothered by more men and horses landing top of them.

The tens of thousands of Empire soldiers charging forward suddenly came to an abrupt stop as their men collapsed into the trenches. It was as if the earth were swallowing them up.

The Empire men trapped on the near side of the trenches turned and looked over their shoulders in fear, realizing they were now cut off from their main army.

"CHARGE!" Volusia commanded.

Her men, emboldened, let out a great battle cry and charged forward, doubling their efforts. They slashed and stabbed trapped soldiers, felling them by the dozens, sending them back. Volusia too her three-pointed flail and swung it high overhead and struck a half dozen soldiers on the back of the head, smiling wide as she killed them.

The Empire men, terrified, began to turn and flee.

"ARROWS AND SPEARS!" Volusia cried.

Her men took up positions and hurled spears and fired arrows into the fleeing soldiers' backs, and hundreds more fell.

Momentum was turning in their favor, but Volusia looked out and saw that the trenches were filling up, crammed with thousands of Empire soldiers, and she knew they could only hold so long.

"THE FLAMES!" Volusia yelled out.

Vokin stepped forward with his men, and as they held out their palms, this time red orbs came flying forth, striking the soldiers inside the trenches. As they did, all the soldiers inside suddenly lit up in flames, massive fires roaring up into the sky, mixed with the awful sound of men being burned alive. A huge ring of fire surrounded the capital, as men let out horrific screams, all the trenches up in flame.

"CHARGE!" Volusia yelled.

Volusia charged forward, right down the center, right for the trenches, for all the men on fire, unafraid. She ran quickly, over their heads and shoulders and arms, using them as a human bridge, and as they screamed beneath her, she relished in their suffering. She ran across them, stepping from head to head, shoulder to shoulder, her men following her, using the Empire bodies as a footbridge.

On the other side, Volusia ran right for the capital doors. The Empire soldiers standing before it, overwhelmed, smoke and fumes in their faces, terrified at the sight of her men charging out of the flames, finally gave in. They turned and ran back for the safety of the capital doors.

The Empire commander, watching over all of it, seeing what was happening below, frowning, yelled out a command. Horns sounded, and slowly, the great golden capital doors began to seal shut. He cared not for his men who had not made it back inside yet, shutting the doors on them. He made a decision to save the city first.

Volusia led her men in fury as they let out a great cry and slaughtered the hundreds more Empire soldiers trapped between them and the now-closed doors. They had nowhere to go, and they butchered them mercilessly, their blood staining the doors.

Volusia herself slaughtered men, hacking through them like thorn bushes, all the way to the capital doors, her men close on her heels, until finally there was no one left to slaughter.

Breathing hard, seeing there was no one left to fight, studying the doors before her, she yelled out:

“BATTERING RAM!”

Her men parted ways, and there was rolled up before her a huge iron battering ram on wheels, rolled forward by two dozen men. They pulled it back and then, at full speed, they rolled it forward, slamming it into the golden doors. There came a great hollow thud.

They slammed it again, and again, and again. But the golden doors would not give.

Volusia saw something falling from the corner of her eye, and began to hear her man scream out. She looked up and saw, high above, the Empire forces leaning over the edge of the parapets and pouring cauldrons of boiling oil down on her men. They then dropped torches along with it, and her men manning the battering ram suddenly lit up in a great conflagration—and the ram along with it.

Volusia let out a scream, irate, determined to get through those doors. Empire reinforcements were pouring in on the horizon, and she knew her time was limited. She needed to get inside the capital, to strike at the heart of it, to cut off its head and take command of its armies. She knew that if she could not get through those doors, all was lost.

She knew the time had come to take desperate action.

Volusia turned and nodded to one of her commanders.

“The human catapults!” she ordered.

The commander stared back, wide-eyed, but then barked orders to his men.

From the back lines of the army there slowly rolled forward a long line of catapults, dozens of them, smaller than the others. In each of these was a bale of hay, and as Volusia watched, the elite of her soldiers mounted the hay and strapped the bales to their stomachs, holding onto the catapult.

“My lady,” said Gibvin, the commander of her armies, rushing up to her, panic in his eyes, “this is a foolhardy plan. You will kill good men. It cannot work. All of these men will die.”

She stared coldly back at him.

“Some will die,” she said, “but the valiant will live. Myself among them.”

He stared back, unbelieving.

“You?” he said. “You do not mean to join them?”

She smiled back.

“I will go first,” she replied.

“You will die,” he gasped.

She smiled wider.

“And since when have I feared death?”

Volusia ran to the catapults, strapped herself to a bale of hay with a long cord, and stood on a catapult. She looked left and right and saw dozens of other soldiers strapped to hay, each on their own catapult, each staring back at her with a terrified look, waiting. She looked high up, a hundred feet, and knew how crazy this was. Yet if she were to die, she could think of no better way.

“FIRE!” she commanded.

There came the sudden noise of a cutting rope, a creaking of wooden gears, and Volusia lost her breath as she suddenly felt herself rocketed up in the air, shooting up in an arc like a shooting star, up higher and higher into the sky, alongside dozens of her other men, all strapped to the huge bales of hay. Volusia, overwhelmed by the sensation, could hardly breathe, squinting into the wind, feeling her stomach drop. She had never felt so reckless. So alive. She felt free, for the first time in her life. Free of all fear of death.

Volusia rocketed up, over the walls, clearing them by a good twenty feet, and she looked down at the amazed look on the Empire general’s face, as he watched her soar over his head, over the wall.

She, though, was one of the lucky ones: many of her men on the catapults did not clear it, but smashed right into the wall, screaming as they plummeted straight down on the wrong side of it, to their

deaths.

As Volusia cleared the wall and began to fall back down the other side, she looked down below to see the streets of the Empire capital far below her. As her speed slowed, the rising sensation stopped, but as it did, she suddenly felt a plummeting sensation, her stomach rising into her throat, as she began to fall straight down the other side.

She flailed as she did, the bale of hay still strapped to her chest, and she tried to position herself so that she landed on the hay. She prayed that the bale held, that her plan worked, that she landed on it stomach first. All around her, her soldiers screamed as they flailed on the way down, too.

As she fell, the cobblestone streets loomed, coming closer and closer…

Her men weighed more than she, and many landed before her. The ones she saw were not so lucky. Most did not land properly on the hay, spinning around awkwardly and landing on stone, breaking their backs instantly. The sickening sound of cracking bones filled the air. It would have caused terror in her, if only there was time to fear.

Moments later, Volusia braced herself, and hit the ground with the impact of an asteroid falling to earth. She turned at the last second and managed to position the hay between her and the ground. The bale of hay exploded, and she hit the ground right through it, it cushioning her fall.

Volusia lay there, her head spinning, winded, slowly crawling to her hands and knees. She shook her head and it took her several moments to realize that she was alive.

She had made it.

She looked around and saw a dozen of her men had made it, too.

Volusia, hearing the cries of Empire soldiers rallying in the streets, wasted no time. She untied her cords, scrambled to her feet, and she led the way, sprinting for the capital doors. Her men, gaining their feet one at a time, fell in behind her.

Before her, in her sights, were a half dozen Empire soldiers, their backs to her, standing guard at the golden doors. It was a light formation because, of course, the Empire never expected the doors to give. And their backs were to her because they never expected a threat from inside.

Volusia sprinted as fast as she could, narrowing the gap, and she managed to lodge a knife in one of the soldiers' backs before any of the others reacted.

The others, though, spun, and an Empire soldier raised his sword and brought it down for Volusia's exposed neck; she realized she could not react quickly enough, and braced herself for the blow.

A spear whizzed through the air and pierced the soldier and

pinned him to the door. Then there came several more, and Volusia turned to see her men rushing up to join her. They attacked the guards in a rush, and the guards, not knowing what was happening and unprepared, were soon all killed, spears and swords and maces descending on them in a hail of death.

Volusia looked out with satisfaction to see that all the men guarding the doors were dead. She turned and spotted the ancient, huge, golden crank that controlled the opening of the doors.

"THE CRANK!" she yelled.

Volusia ran to the huge crank, reached up, and with all her might yanked on it—to no avail. It was too heavy for her.

Her men joined in, and together, they all began to pull on it—and slowly, it began to move.

There came a great creaking noise and slowly, one foot at a time, Volusia watched with delight as the doors began to open. First it was but a crack of sunlight, just a few inches wide—but then it widened. And widened.

Behind her, dozens of Empire soldiers within the city caught onto her presence and charged to kill her. They were perhaps thirty yards off and closing in.

But as the doors opened there came a great shout and Volusia watched with ecstasy as her army flooded in. The Empire soldiers stopped in their tracks, turned, and ran.

Her army poured into the capital, through doors that were increasingly widening, and she watched them run by like a stampede of elephants, right into this ancient city's sacred streets.

The air was soon filled with the sound of Empire soldiers and citizens being slaughtered, of their blood filling the streets, and Volusia threw back her head and roared with laughter.

The capital, finally, was hers.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gwendolyn took a long drink from the sack of water, this time handed to her by one of the knights, who bent over her, his armor shining in the sun. He gave her more to drink than those nomads had, and she drank greedily, gulping until it ran down her cheeks.

Coughing, Gwen sat up for the first time, feeling energized. She opened her eyes, squinting into the sun, raising one hand, and realized she was on a boat, a long, narrow boat. On it were a half-dozen of these knights, accompanying her, and sprawled out were all her men, all spilled out in various positions of recovery, all being handed sacks of water. They glided calmly on the bluest waters she'd ever seen, and ever her long trek through the arid desert, this all felt like a dream.

Gwen was filled with relief to see they were all alive, all recovering, some of them even eating small morsels of bread. She looked up to see a knight handing her a piece of bread, and she took a small bite, she felt her strength returning. The knight, squatting beside her, also held out a small plate of honey, and as she dipped the bread in the honey and tasted it, it was the greatest thing she'd ever eaten. She felt her spirits coming back to her.

Gwen heard whining, and she looked down to see Krohn curled up in her lap, and she immediately remembered him, feeling guilty. she held out the rest of her bread to him, and he snatched it up, gulping it down and whining for more. He licked the honey off her fingers.

Gwen wanted to thank the knight as he got up to leave, but she was still too exhausted, her throat too parched, for the words to come out. She wondered if she would ever speak again.

As the knight left and went about attending the others, Gwen, stroking Krohn's head, looked out at the vista before her. Gentle lake breezes caressed her face as they glided through the lake, as big as an ocean, the boat gently rocking. The knights rowed in harmony, and as they went, the lake shimmered, the most beautiful color blue she'd ever seen. Even more shocking was what lay on the horizon: a land overflowing with bounty, a green so lush it put the waters to shame. It didn't seem possible.

Gwen was even more surprised to see so many sailboats in the water, close to the far shore, so many people living an idle life of leisure, of joy, sailing in harmony and security. Life in the Ring had been bountiful, yet always on guard, hardened by combat, by threats; here, there appeared to be no threats. It discombobulated her to see such freedom in the midst of a hostile Empire, and such bounty in the midst of a cruel, lifeless desert. Gwen could tell at a glance that this

society, whatever it was, was clearly rich, clearly well-established, safe and secure behind the ridge which framed it, stretching in a massive circle around it, on the horizon, in much the same way the Canyon had framed the Ring. And yet this land, with all its bounty, put even the Ring to shame.

Gwendolyn wanted desperately to talk, to know more. So many questions raced through her mind. She reached out and grabbed the arm of a knight passing by, and he kneeled turned and looked at her. She tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come out; she became exhausted from the effort.

"Rest now," he said gently. "You need it."

He left, and Gwen tried to look out, to see more; yet the calm water breezes, heavy with moisture, lulled her to sleep, made her feel relaxed, utterly at ease, for the first time in she did not know how long, and despite her efforts, in no time she was fast asleep.

* * *

Gwendolyn slowly opened her eyes, squinting at the brightness, sat up, and could hardly believe what she saw. It at first appeared to be an illusion. She looked up at two immense golden statues, each a hundred feet high, arms raised high in an odd salute and crossed with each other. One was a statue of a knight, torso muscular, exposed, and the other was of a woman, smaller, but equally muscular. They each held out swords, and as Gwen looked down, she saw that beneath them was a huge arch, through which the water ran between their legs, heralding the entrance to the land and flowing into a massive harbor. Light reflected off of them and shined down onto everything, making the harbor's waters shimmer as if they were alive.

As their boat passed through Gwen sat up straighter, taking in her surroundings, rapt with attention. She had expected to find a quiet, forested lonely place and she was amazed to find them entering a sophisticated, bustling city harbor, filled with tall ships, with all sorts of masts and sails, its shores lined with storefronts, houses, streets of a smooth, well-worn cobblestone and bustling with horses, carriages, and people. The facades all looked well-established, and it was clear at a glance that this society had been here for centuries. Traffic crisscrossed the harbor in every direction, and the place oozed wealth and luxury. She wondered if all this could be real.

The others, too, began to rouse as they soon touched down at a dock, coming to a gentle stop; they had barely docked when the knights accompanying them hurried to help each one, taking Gwen's arms, helping her up and toward the pier. It was the first time Gwen

had walked since the ordeal, and it felt good to be on her feet again, though a bit unsteady. She needed the help as she took her first steps. She felt a rubbing at her leg and was reassured to look down and see that Krohn was still there, beside her.

Gwen was elated to see Kendrick, Steffen, and all the others walking, too, and as she reached the pier, Kendrick and Steffen each took an arm and helped her up onto dry land. They each looked as if they'd been through an ordeal, much more gaunt than they had been, and yet they each smiled back warmly; she could tell they were, as was she, relieved to have a second chance at life.

The knights led them all down the pier and toward a gleaming golden open-air carriage, large enough to hold them all. She let the others pass first, and she watched with relief as she saw all of her people—Illepra and the baby, Stara, Kendrick, Sandara, Steffen, Aberthol, Brandt, Atme, and a half dozen Silver—board. Gwen was thrilled to see Argon still alive, too, carried by the knights, in a weakened state, still unconscious, yet alive all the same. He was placed on the cart gingerly, and she prayed that they could find a cure for him here in this place.

At least she had salvaged some of the Ring, and at least she had gotten them this far.

One of the knights helped her up the three golden steps, and as he turned to go, Gwen reached out and grabbed his wrist.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

The knight looked at her, surprised.

"Why, to the castle, my lady," he replied, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "To meet our King. It will be in his right to decide what shall become of you, whether he shall let you stay."

Gwen felt a flush of fear.

"What sort of King is he?" she asked.

The knight smiled.

"A good and fair King. A wise King. I pray he allows you to stay."

There came the crack of a whip, and the horses—four gorgeous white mares, with long flowing hair, the most beautiful she had ever seen—suddenly broke into action. They took off at a fast walk, and Gwen was surprised to feel no bumps. She looked down and saw the carriage was of a superior construction, one she had never seen, and the roads were so smooth, it was like riding on air. She was impressed, once again, by these people, whoever they were.

They passed through immaculate streets as they traversed the harbor town, filled with people dressed in elaborate outfits. The streets were overflowing with people peddling wares, sampling foods, walking about in a hurry, all walking about freely with no sense of danger. Gwen was amazed by all the fashions, the brightly colored

outfits cut in unusual designs on all the women, and by the hairstyles of the men; they all seemed to have shaved heads and bright blond beards. It appeared to be the custom here.

All the people seemed relaxed and friendly, many leaning back and laughing aloud good-naturedly. They appeared to be an open and friendly people, quick to laugh, the men and women tall and broad-shouldered, well-tanned and relaxed, children running and giggling at their feet. It reminded her of King's Court in its heyday.

Gwen studied the buildings for any sign of a castle, taking in this whole place with fascination, and saw no sight of it. The roads, in fact, soon twisted and turned their way out of the town, and before her she saw it leading to open country and sky, leading to gently rolling green hills. She was surprised to see they were leaving the city.

The castle, she realized, must be someplace else—perhaps more inland.

Gwen leaned forward, closer to the cart driver, who was holding the horses' reins, his back to her.

"Where is the castle?" Gwen asked him.

He looked back over his shoulder good-naturedly and shook his head.

"Not for quite a while, my dear," he said. "It's on the far end of the Ridge. Could take most of the day to get there. Just sit back and relax and enjoy our land."

The road led to another road as one land shifted to another, more rural, lush trees lining the path. They traveled up and down smooth, rolling hills, gently twisting and turning, birds singing, passing orchards and vineyards and farms the likes of which she'd never seen. Gwen saw entire fields filled with glowing red fruits, dripping juice. She saw other fields filled with blueberries the size of her hand. She saw vineyards heavy with grapes, saw happy farmers pushing carts, whistling; she saw lush grass fields and an entire horizon filled with cattle, horses, and goats grazing freely beneath the glowing suns, which were a softer orange here.

This was a land of splendor.

"Have you ever seen anything like it?" came a voice beside her.

She saw Kendrick sitting beside her, looking at it all, as were the others, equally amazed.

Gwen shook her head.

"I almost don't think it's real," said Illepra, sitting on her other side, still holding the baby, who, Gwen was elated to see, looked well again.

"And what if this King should not allow us to stay?" Steffen asked.

It was the very questions burning on Gwen's mind.

“We have been graced with a second chance at life,” she said. “Whatever god brings us, that we shall accept.”

Gwen turned to Aberthol, who studied the land with his meaningful eyes.

“Is this the Second Ring?” she asked him.

He sighed.

“I cannot say for sure, my lady,” he said. “If the second ring exists, surely this must be it.”

Gwendolyn turned and looked at Argon, dying for answers. She was burning more than ever to ask him, for him to tell her everything about this place, about their destiny, about what would be. Yet he still lay there, breathing but unconscious.

There were passed around sacks water, left for them by the knights, and Gwen felt one placed in her hand by Steffen, nice and cold. She drank and it was a sweet taste, perhaps mixed with honey, and she felt a wave of relief. She also felt sleepy.

The gentle breezes of this place got to her, and she lay back, despite herself, and found herself closing her eyes, each step of the horse lulling her more and more deeply to sleep.

* * *

When Gwen finally opened her eyes again, she did not know how many hours later, she saw the two suns low in the sky, a soft reddish glow cast over the lands. She looked around and saw the others were all fast asleep as well. She slowly shook her dreams from her mind, dreams of Thorgrin, of Guwayne, both of them reaching out to her on some faraway sea. A heaviness sat in her heart as she thought of them. She felt consumed by sadness as she looked all around, searching for them, wishing more than anything that they were here now, by her side.

Gwendolyn heard a whine, looked down, and stroked Krohn’s head in her lap. She looked out and saw the carriage still moving, and realized they’d been traveling all day. How big was this land? she wondered. She marveled at how it never seemed to end, at how such abundance could cover such a broad area.

Gwen looked up, the only one awake, as the carriage slowly crested a hill and then came to a stop at its peak. As they rounded it, Gwen leaned forward, stunned at the sight before her: there, on the horizon, lay the most beautiful city she had ever seen, everything built of silver, shiny silver spires rising high into the sky, reflected in the late sun of the afternoon. It all sparkled, and looked positively magical. It was the most beautiful place she had ever seen.

The city, sprawling forever, was ringed by low, stone walls, by a series of moats with bridges spanning them, and interspersed with grazing meadows and fields. And at its center, rising above it all, was a gleaming silver castle, replete with spires, parapets, a drawbridge, and hundreds of knights standing guard.

Her heart beat faster as she took it all in. Who were these people? she wondered. Would they find a new home here?

"My lady," the driver said, turning to her as he came to a stop. "Allow me to be the first to welcome you to Ridge Castle."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Thor stood at the bow of the sleek, black pirate ship, now in their control, grasped the rail, and looked out at the fast-moving seas beneath him, wondering. Somewhere out there, he knew, was his child, Guwayne. Somewhere out there was his destination, was what would put an end to this mission and return him to Gwendolyn.

But where?

As their ship rose up and down on the high seas, the ocean spraying his face, they cruised at a fast clip, their sails full, faster now than they ever had, given this powerful ship. It was what they'd needed to have from the start. It was still, of course, not nearly as fast as Thor could have traveled with a dragon beneath him and, missing Mycoples, Thor searched the skies for Lycoples, hoping beyond hope that she would return to them, help him.

But she was nowhere to be found.

Thor reflected. He had felt so certain of finding Guwayne when he had first set out, so certain that he was just around the bend. He had felt clear on where he was, knew that he was so close to finding him.

But now, after the trek through the underworld, after that storm, after the battle with the pirates, Thor was not so sure; he felt as if he were picking up the pieces, starting from scratch again. Yet this time, he had no idea where to search for his son. None of them did. He could not help but feel as if now, even with the faster ship, they were sailing this boat aimlessly.

Thor did not know where they were going, but at least they were going *somewhere*; after all, sitting still in those seas would not yield his boy. This ship, faster and bigger than any he'd ever ridden on, cut through the water like butter, and Thor thought it ironic that pirates, renegades, should have the nicest boats for themselves. At least some measure of justice had been done.

It felt good to finally be in a substantial ship, one that would take them easily across the seas, that could weather any storm—and one stocked with provisions. Thor and his brothers had been pleasantly surprised to discover, after they had taken over the ship, the hold was filled not only all manner of loot, of jewelry and gold and priceless artifacts, but also barrels of rum, of wine, of fresh water, of beer, and box after box filled with canned foods, jams jellies, crackers, and other goods. These pirates clearly did not starve. God knows who they stole it from, but Thor no longer cared. It was theirs now, all of it, and Thor finally felt equipped to cross the world if he had to, to find his boy.

"Look here!" came a young girl's voice. "Look what I found!"

Thor snapped out of it and turned to see Angel tugging on his leg,

standing beside him. He knelt down and looked at her, she so proudly holding out some sort of delicacy she had found. It was long and red and appeared to be soft.

"What is it?" Thor asked.

She beamed.

"Candy!" she exclaimed. "It's soft and chewy. It tastes like raspberries. Taste it!"

She held it out to Thorgrin with her arm covered in the white leprosy, and he winced inside, seeing her condition. He had grown to love Angel more than he could say, just like his own daughter, and it pained him to see her suffering from her affliction. Thor inwardly resolved to find a cure for her—even if he had to cross the world to find it. There had to be a way; he would not let her die.

But Angel did not seem pained—on the contrary, she was so joyful holding our her candy.

Outwardly, Thor smiled. He held it to his mouth and took a bite and it was delicious, tasting like raspberries exploding in his mouth.

"Those pirates," she said with a giggle, "at least they had good taste!"

Thor was delighted to see Angel in such good spirits, and he turned and surveyed the ship. He saw all of his men were in good spirits, all of them looking relaxed and relieved for the first time since they had embarked. He understood. Finally, after all they'd been through, they had the comfort and safety of a big, luxurious ship, all the food they could eat, all the wine they could drink, and for the first time in as long as he could remember, they were not in danger. Thor started to feel relaxed, too, and would have been completely at ease were if not for the knowledge that his son and wife were out there somewhere, waiting for him—and possibly in danger.

With little to do, the others lounged on deck, Elden sharpening his ax, O'Connor polishing his bow and adjusting the aim, each man engaged with their weaponry, each lost in his own world. Thor was elated to have their weapons back, and most of all, he was grateful for Angel, who had saved his life more than once now. The funny thing was, he realized, that he thought he'd been saving her—but it was *she* who was saving him.

He turned to her, intent on showing his gratitude.

"As long as I live, I shall protect you. I shall always put your life before mine. Stay close to me, and I promise you no harm shall ever become you."

Angel looked back at him, tears in her eyes, and she rushed forward and hugged him.

"You have already given me back my life," she said, "when you took me from that island. You are the only one I've met who was not

afraid of me. Not afraid to touch or hug me. You treat me like a normal person, as though nothing were wrong with me. And that is what has made me want to live again."

Thor held her back and looked at her meaningfully.

"And that is because there is nothing wrong with you," he said. "You are perfect. And whatever the cause of your affliction, I vow to you, I shall find a cure. Do you trust me?"

She nodded back, and he could see the hope welling in her eyes, and she hugged him again, wrapping her little arms around his legs.

"I love you," she said.

Thor felt shocked at her words, and they went right through him, especially after all he'd been through.

"I love you too," he said back as he held her, and he meant every word of it.

Reece made his way over, coming up beside him, and Thor turned and looked out at the sea with him.

"It looks like we sail north," Reece said to Thorgrin, clasping an arm on his shoulder. "Have you any destination in mind?"

Thor slowly, sadly, shook his head.

"Wherever my son may be," he said. "I suppose I am waiting for the fates to point the way."

"Since that storm," Matus chimed in, coming over, "we've been blown so far off course—none of us even know where we are now."

"We weren't even on course when that storm hit," O'Connor added, joining them. "Once we picked up Angel, once we left the Isle of the Lepers, we had no real destination anymore."

"Perhaps we should give up the search," Elden said, joining them, "and set sail for the Empire. Try at least to find a place we know exists. We can reunite with Gwendolyn and the others and decide from there. Perhaps they've heard something—perhaps they have an idea."

Thor grimaced as he slowly shook his head.

"I cannot return without my boy," he said gravely.

The others fell quiet, understanding, and a heavy silence blanketed them, broken by nothing but the howling of the wind. Thor sighed. Deep down, he knew the others were right. They were sailing aimlessly now in a vast sea, and it was bringing them no closer to Guwayne.

Thor left the group, walking alone over to the rail; he lowered his head as he stared down at the waves, the spray hitting him in the face, and closed his eyes. He became very quiet within himself, trying to focus, to center himself.

Please, God, he prayed. *Give me a sign. Any sign. Show me. Where's my boy? Where shall I go next?*

As Thor fell silent, he felt a slow heat begin to well up inside him. It burned stronger and stronger, and he could feel it throbbing his palms, and then on his forehead, between his eyes. He felt he was getting a message.

Thor opened his eyes and looked out at the horizon and as he felt the universe talking to him, he expected to see a sign. Yet he was confused to see nothing but the endless clouds, rolling on the horizon as far as he could see.

Then, suddenly, as he waited, there came a lone screech, high up in the air.

At first Thor was not even sure if he heard it or it was just his imagination. He looked up and searched the clouds and saw nothing.

Then it came again, a lone, piercing screech.

Thor searched the skies again and this time his heart leapt to see Lycoples, circling high overhead, flapping her wings. He could not believe it: she was really here.

“A dragon!” Angel called out in amazement.

Angel came running over, as did the others, all looking up in awe as Lycoples came swooping down, flying impossibly fast. She dove down lower, swooping down right for them, so close that right before she hit them they all had to duck to miss her long talons.

She then rose up again, swooping up over the mast of the ship, and flying in the other direction. She flew, this time, in the opposite direction from where they were sailing—heading south. She let out one final screech, then she disappeared from view.

As Thor watched her go, he felt a heat within his palms. He felt it was a message. She was giving them a hint, trying to lead them where to go.

As Thor closed his eyes, he sensed the mind of the dragon, and he had a sudden flash of awareness. Someone he loved was in danger.

Thor turned to the others.

“Turn the ship around,” he commanded. “And follow her.”

They all looked back at him in shock.

“Is she leading us to Guwayne?” Reece asked.

Thor shook his head slowly as he watched her disappear into the horizon.

“No,” he replied. “She leads us to my sister.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Darius felt a strong kick in the small of his back and he went stumbling forward, still shackled, the pain shooting up his spine. He kept his feet, though, and went stumbling forward out of a long, dark tunnel and into blinding sunlight, met by a roar so deafening it shook his entire being.

The arena.

Darius squinted into the light and saw the largest crowd he'd ever seen, seated in rows hundreds of feet high, all jumping to their feet, roaring, shaking the very ground. It hurt his ears, made it hard to think, as he stumbled forward, trying to keep his balance, still shackled to all the others amidst a clinking of chains.

As they were prodded by Empire kicks out into the center of the arena, Darius felt his ankle jerked by his shackles, one of the other boys off balance, and he stumbled again. He looked over and took solace in the fact that at least close by were his four friends, Raj, Desmond, Kaz, and Luzi; beside them were shackled a dozen other gladiators, boys whose faces he did not know and did not want to know. He knew that soon enough they would all be dead. Better not to remember.

The deafening roars continued, and Darius, more than ever, wanted to break free, to prepare himself. But to his dismay they were all chained together, with perhaps ten feet of chain link between them, and there was nowhere to go. He could not even maneuver freely without being at the mercy of these other boys' movements. They stood there, in the arena, all these chained boys, and he could see the fear on some of their faces; others stared out with cold, hard looks, looks of resignation. They all knew they would soon be dead, and each looked death in the face differently.

It would be hard enough, Darius knew, to fight anything that came at him—but with his feet shackled to these other boys, he would be too compromised to even put up a fight. If one of the boys stumbled, Darius would stumble, too. He was at the mercy of the others. All he had was the measly club that had been given to him and the others before he'd entered the arena, and that he clutched for dear life.

The crowd began to quiet, and Darius looked out to see Morg enter the arena through a door on the opposite end and march dramatically into the center, savoring the attention, his stark bald head gleaming beneath the sun. As he reached the center, a cruel smile on his face, the crowd roared in delight, and he held his arms out wide, palms up, and slowly turned, until the crowd gradually

quieted down.

"Fellow citizens of the Empire," he boomed out. "I present to you today's crop of gladiators!"

The crowd rose to its feet, stomping, out for blood, and Darius could feel the apprehension of the other boys deepen.

Morg raised his hands again, and the crowd quieted as he held them rapt with attention.

"On this day," he boomed, "Day One of the games, the games end when the gladiators win—or when they only have left six men. If any gladiators survive, they will advance to tomorrow's games. As always, it will be a fight to the death!"

Darius immediately did the math in his head: there were sixteen of them, so that meant that they either had to kill all the Empire opponents, or that ten of his people had to die. He thought it more likely that ten of his people would die first.

The crowd roared in violent approval, and as the Morg retreated, horns sounded, trumpets echoed throughout the stadium, and Darius watched, on edge, as at the far end of the arena two huge iron doors opened, slamming, echoing.

The crowd roared yet again, as through them there appeared two Empire soldiers on horseback, dressed in the all-black Empire armor, wielding spears and long axes, rumbling into the ring, making a dramatic entrance. The crowd went crazy as they burst in, kicking up dust as they charged right for Darius and the others.

"We must stick together!" Darius called out, turning to the others as the riders bore down on them all. "We must fight as one! If not, we will all be lost!"

The others looked back; some seemed too terrified to respond, others seemed in agreement, and others seemed defiant.

Drok, chained at the far end of the line, grimaced back at Darius.

"No one appointed you leader over us!" he snapped. "You move as you want, and we'll move as we want. And if you end up in my way, just maybe I'll kill you first."

Darius clenched the club in his hand and looked up at the Empire soldiers, bedecked in armor, all charging down on him, wielding the finest swords and the longest spears and axes. Then he looked over at the lineup of boys, and he realized they were badly outmanned and outweaponed. It was an unfair match. But then again, that was what the Empire wanted: that was what made entertainment.

Darius felt his legs being pulled out from him, as the others shifted nervously in every direction. He was so compromised, he did not see how he could possibly win, much less survive for three rounds.

Darius forced himself to overcome his fears, to be strong. As the horses bore down on them, Darius clenched his club, braced himself,

and prepared as best he could, feeling all his muscles tensing.

The first rider reached the first of their line, a boy Darius did not recognize, and the boy tried to leap out of the way. But the boy underestimated how short the length of chain was connecting him to the other boy, and as he tried to leap, he went nowhere. The soldier's lance came down and pierced the boy through his rib cage.

The crowd cheered in ecstasy, as the soldier galloped past them, preparing to circle around again.

On his heels, the other soldier came charging, taking aim for Raj. Darius saw that Raj was stuck, unable to move, his feet shackled to a boy who did not react in time.

"Move!" Raj shouted, but the boy too frozen with fear. Darius knew that if he did not react soon, his friend would be dead.

Darius stepped forward, took aim, and with all his might, threw his club.

As the soldier neared Raj and raised his long battle-ax, the club, spinning end over end, hit his wrist and knocked the ax from his hand. It landed on the dust with a thud, just sparing Raj as the soldier rode past.

The crowd oohed at the close miss, and Raj looked back at him with a look of gratitude; Darius knew he got lucky, but it was unlikely he'd be lucky again.

Darius wasted no time. He lunged forward, trying to reach the fallen ax. Yet as he neared it, but a few feet away, his shackles tightened. He looked back to see the boy he was shackled to resisting, trying to run the other way in fear of the other soldier who was charging down on them again. Darius reached out but fell flat on his face, just short of the battle-ax.

Darius heard a rumbling and looked up, helpless, as the first soldier charged down right for him. He knew he was about to be trampled.

Desmond rushed forward, blocking the way between Darius and the horse, swung his club, and brought it down right for the horse's nose. It was a perfect strike. The horse reared back, and it was diverted from Darius at the last second, saving his life.

Darius reached out and tried once again to reach battle-ax, but it was still out of reach. At the same time, he suddenly felt himself yanked backwards by the shackles, pulled back several feet. He looked over to see Drok come up behind one of the other boys, wrap his shackles around the boy's throat, and squeeze. Darius could not believe what was happening: why, he wondered, would Drok attack one of his own?

Then he realized: once they had won—or there were only six of them left—the day's games would be called off. This boy, mercenary

that he was, wanted to take a shortcut: to kill off the other gladiators.

Darius watched in horror as Drok choked the other boy to death, it all happening so quickly, the boy collapsing simply in his arms, eyes open wide, dead. The crowd cheered.

Drok wasted no time. He pounced for Luzi, clearly intent on killing as many as he could. Darius realized he must have sensed an opportunity in Luzi, he being one of the smallest boys. Or perhaps he just held a grudge.

Drok jumped on him, wrapped his chains around his neck, and as he began to squeeze, Darius saw Luzi's eyes bulge wide open. He knew that if he didn't so something, then soon Luzi would be dead.

Darius broke into action. Ignoring the riders bearing down on them, ignoring the ax left in the dust, he instead turned, lunged forward, reached back, then swung his elbow into Drok's face.

There came a cracking noise as Darius broke Drok's nose and he fell backwards, onto the ground. Luzi broke free of his grip, gasping, and Raj stepped forward and kicked Drok clean across the jaw, knocking him out.

"Are you okay?" Darius asked Luzi.

Luzi nodded back, shaken.

Darius heard a rumble and turned to see the second rider circling, bearing down on them again. One of the other gladiators managed to reach the forgotten battle-ax lying on the ground, and he heaved it up and swung it down, aiming to sever the shackles connecting him to the others. But it was a wild, reckless swing, and as he brought it down the boy beside him shifted, and he accidentally took off the boy's foot.

The boy shrieked out in pain, grasping for his severed foot, blood squirting everywhere. The boy holding the ax looked back at him, horrified, frozen in shock, and as the other soldier bore down on them, he reached out, snatched the ax from his hands, and in one motion swung around and chopped off the boy's head.

The crowd went wild.

The two horses, both armed now, circled around again and charged the remaining boys. Darius knew it did not look good. That ax was their best chance, and now it was lost.

Darius felt himself suddenly pulled backward several feet, and he turned to see some of the other boys were running, trying to get out of the way of the soldiers bearing down on them; Darius, at their mercy, found himself pulled back by the chains. He went stumbling back several feet, now exposes in the middle of the arena as the soldier came charging right for him, lance held out, aiming for his back. Darius knew he would not be able to get out of the way in time.

Darius braced himself for the death blow—when suddenly, Kaz

rushed forward and tackled him, bumping him out of the way with his shoulder and getting him out of the way of the oncoming horse.

Darius, knocked to the ground, rolled and turned; he looked back to see Kaz standing where he just was a moment ago, and his heart stopped as he saw his friend suddenly get punctured by the lance, right through his chest.

Kaz cried out, pinned to the ground, as the crowd went wild, the lance still inside him, the weapon so deeply lodged the soldier could not get it out. The soldier continued riding, taking a victory lap around the stadium without his lance, the crowd cheering like crazy.

Darius looked over at his friend, lying there, dead. He could scarcely believe it. He had died for him; were it not for Kaz, he would not be alive right now. He felt the weight of guilt and responsibility sitting heavily on his shoulders.

And a burning desire, like he'd never felt, for vengeance.

Something snapped inside Darius; he knew the time had come. His friend had thrown his life to the wind, and it was time for him to do the same.

Darius ran to Kaz, who lay dead, and extracted the Empire soldier's lance from his body. He stood, turned, and faced the other soldier who charged for him, his long ax out at his side, aiming it for his head.

Darius took aim, stepped forward, and threw the lance. It whizzed through the air with perfect aim and went right through the soldier's armor, piercing his heart.

The crowd cried out in shock as the Empire soldier fell from his horse. He landed on the ground, rolling to a stop just feet from Darius, dead, his ax at his side.

Darius wasted no time. He rushed forward, his chains allowing him just enough room, grabbed hold of the ax, and brought it down on his chains. He then severed another boy's chains; then another.

The remaining Empire soldier, in the midst of his victory lap, turned and charged. As the soldier now faced freed gladiators, some of them armed, Darius could detect uncertainty in his eyes. After all, his friend was now dead; the Empire were no longer untouchable.

The soldier drew his sword as he rode, held it high, and bore down right for Darius. Darius stood there, holding the long battle-ax before him with both hands, unflinching, waiting. As the soldier reached him, Darius stepped aside, now free to do so with his chains severed, raised the ax, and swung. He axed the man's sword, and there came a great clang and a shower of sparks, as he severed the sword in two. The blow, though, also shattered the ax head, leaving Darius with just a long, studded staff.

The soldier rode past him, shocked, as the crowd cheered, and in

a rage, he circled back again.

Darius, shackles free, no longer waited. He charged across the arena, not waiting to meet him.

The soldier seemed surprised to see Darius charging. He was unprepared. He reached down to draw his other sword, but Darius was already upon him, and in one quick motion, while sprinting, Darius pulled back his staff and swung, aiming at the horse's legs. The blow took out the horse's legs, and the soldier went flying face-first into the dirt.

The crowd cheered.

Darius wasted no time. He leapt upon the soldier's back, reached around and wrapped his chains about his neck. He squeezed, holding on with all his might as the solider bucked.

"This is for Kaz," Darius said.

The crowd jumped to their feet, shouting like mad, as Darius held on with all he had, strangling the huge Empire soldier, twice his size. Darius, palms bleeding, would not let go, not for his life. He owed Kaz that much, at least.

Finally, the soldier stopped moving.

Darius lost all sense of reality as a horn blew somewhere, the crowd went wild, and he felt hands beneath his arms, the hands of his brothers, raising him to his feet.

The world spun around him, and it took him a moment to realize it was all over.

To realize that he, Darius, had done the impossible.

He had won.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Volusia sat at the head of the shining, semicircular golden table inside Capital Hall, and looked out at the crowd of men before her, feeling triumphant. Seated opposite her, at the far end of the table, was the commander of the Empire armies, along with a dozen of his generals seated beside him, and behind them, one hundred Empire senators, all dressed in the distinctive white and scarlet robes befitting their rank. All of them stared back at her, frowning, with a mix of defiance and anxiety, as they prepared to hear her judgment.

Volusia looked out at all of them, studied their faces, allowing the silence to linger, allowing them to realize that she was in control now —and relishing in her power over them. Thanks to her, her forces had managed to take the capital city; they had slaughtered all of the Empire soldiers within its walls and her armies had filled the capital, swarming within it, before sealing the doors behind them. Of course, beyond the capital walls, on the far side of the city, there remained hundreds of thousands of hostile Empire soldiers, all teeming outside, waiting to hear the terms of surrender. Over time they could get in— but for now, at least, she and her men were secure, pending the terms of this negotiation.

Volusia sat there, facing them all, her palms on the golden table, relishing this moment. She, a young girl, had defied all of these old men, these stale old men that had ruled the Empire for centuries with a fist of steel. She sat even now in the very seat of power, in Capital Hall, at the head of the Golden Table, the place reserved only for Empire rulers. She had achieved the impossible. All that remained was to negotiate with these men, to acquire the remainder of the Empire armies, and to once and for all, take supreme control of the Empire.

"Queen Volusia," a voice rang throughout the hall.

Volusia looked over to see one of the senators step forward beside the general, chin up, looking down at her defiantly.

"You have assembled us to hear our terms of surrender. We shall present them to you. If you agree, then all shall be harmonious between us. Our forces shall concede to yours, and you shall rule the Empire jointly with us."

Volusia stared back firmly, annoyed that he dared try to dictate terms to her.

"*Goddess* Volusia," she corrected.

The senator stared back in shock, clearly not expecting that response, and the commander of the Empire armies stood, put a fist on the table, and scowled down at her.

"You won by sorcery, deception, and trickery," he growled with

his deep voice. “You are no Queen of mine, and you are certainly no Goddess. You are just a young girl, an arrogant young girl, who got lucky one too many times. Your luck will run out, I assure you.”

She smiled back.

“Perhaps,” she replied, “but it seems, Commander, that your luck already has.”

He reddened, his scowl deepening, and she noticed him glance down at his scabbard, now empty; he then looked up and glanced all about the edges of the room, saw her hundreds of soldiers lined up, all with swords in hand, and he clearly thought better of making any rash moves.

He sighed bitterly.

“I am prepared to surrender all of my men to you,” he said. “Hundreds of thousands of men outside these walls. In return, you shall give me once again the leadership of my men, with the dignity and respect befitting a commander of the Empire.”

“Additionally,” the senator chimed in beside him, “you shall acknowledge us, the hundred senators who have always served the Republic of the Empire, in our rightful roles, and we shall share power jointly with you, as we always have with every Supreme Commander. We shall put all your atrocities behind us for the sake of war, and you shall make all decisions with us jointly.”

Volusia smirked, realizing how delusional these men were. They thought she was a mere commander: they had no idea they were addressing a Goddess. The great Goddess Volusia.

She made the wait for her reply, and the senator and the generals stared back at her, clearly uncomfortable with the long silence, clearly uncertain of what she might do next.

The senator, nervous, cleared his throat.

“If you do not meet our terms,” the senator called out, “if you try to defy us in any way, be certain you and your men will die here today. Yes, your soldiers fill the capital. But do not forget that beyond these capital walls there sit ten times our soldiers—and beyond that, beyond the sea, there are Romulus’s one million men, who even now have been called back from the Ring to return to our service.”

“And in the other horns of the Empire,” called out another senator, “there await millions more soldiers being drawn up now to destroy you.”

The senator smiled.

“So, you see,” he added, “you are vastly outnumbered, surrounded in every direction.”

“If you deny our offer,” the Empire commander growled, “you will die within these walls. Just like your mother.”

Volusia smiled.

“Like my mother? Don’t you know that it was *I* who killed my mother?”

They all looked back at her, horrified, caught off guard.

“I will not be slaughtered here today, or tomorrow, or even in this lifetime. I know I am outnumbered, and I know that if I do not accept your terms, all of us will die. Which is why I have come here to accept them.”

The Empire commander and senators stared back at her, and she could see surprise and relief in their faces.

“A wise decision,” the senator said.

Volusia stood, her men standing beside her immediately, and she walked slowly around the table, until she stood opposite the Empire commander.

The tension thick in the air, she looked up at him; he was a large and broad man of the Empire race, with the glowing yellow skin, the small horns, and he was covered in scars. He smiled down at her, more of a scowl, arrogant, smirking, as she came close. He had clearly expected this acknowledgment of his power.

“I shall acknowledge your place in my Empire, as commander of my men,” she said. “Kiss my ring, acknowledge my command, and you shall have a place in my Empire forever.”

She held out her right hand. On her ring finger was a large onyx ring, black, sparkling, and the commander looked at her, skeptical, debating. His face reddened.

Then, slowly, he reached out, took her hand, and kissed the ring.

As he did, suddenly, he froze. His eyes bulged in his head and his entire body started to quake.

Moments later, he grabbed his throat, blood pouring from his mouth, and he slumped onto the floor, dead.

All of his men looked down at him, astonished, frozen in shock.

At the same moment, Volusia’s men pounced from all corners of the room, swords drawn, descending on the group of senators and generals. There was nowhere for them to run. Volusia’s men hacked them down, slaughtering them where they stood.

The room soon ran red with blood, blood spraying all over Volusia, and she smiled wide and laughed, reveling in it, cherishing each corpse which fell at her feet, the blood that ran through her toes. She especially cherished her onyx ring, filled with a poison so deadly that even touching one’s lips would send them to their death. It was a trick she had not used in many years—but had seen her mother use often.

Finally, when the room fell still, nothing left but the moaning of a few men, the sound of her men walking throughout the room and stabbing corpses to make sure they were dead, Volusia reached down

and placed her palms in the pool of blood. She closed her eyes and felt the life essence of her enemies in that blood. All those that would dare oppose her were now dead.

Volusia turned and slowly walked through the set of double doors leading to the balcony, overlooking the entire Empire capital. She stepped outside, beneath the two setting suns, and she could see below her, all of her men filling the capital, slaying citizens. She looked down with great gratification as she watched a statue of Andronicus topple to the ground—and then, a statute of Romulus. They landed with a great crash, marble dust flying in the air, and her men cheered.

The crowd parted ways, and as it did there rolled forward an immense, golden statue of Volusia, a hundred feet long, lying on its back, propped up on a long wooden cart with wheels. She had had it rolled all the way from Volusia itself, knowing that one day she would be able to place it in the capital. She watched with great satisfaction the vision she had already seen many times in her mind's eye: hundreds of her men, using ropes, slowly hoisted it, putting it into place, in the center of the capital. Her statue rose, gleaming in the suns, taller than anything in the capital. Her men let out a great cheer as it stood firmly in place.

Her people all turned and looked up at her on the balcony, and their cheer intensified.

"VOLUSIA! VOLUSIA!"

It was a cheer of ecstasy, a cheer of triumph. She held out her arms wide to them and looked down on them, her people. She was a Goddess now, and all these men she had created were her children. She felt their adulation as she held out her palms, the adulation of all her children.

Volusia looked out at the horizon, beyond the city walls, and saw all the Empire armies filling the horizon, clamoring to get inside these walls. She knew, too, that beyond them, somewhere on the horizon, a great army was coming.

A great storm was coming. And she welcomed it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gwendolyn walked slowly, still weak, leaning occasionally on Kendrick and Steffen beside her, Krohn at her side, and joined by her entourage, the last remnants of the Ring, as they were ushered into the most spectacular castle she had ever seen. Her heart beat faster in anticipation of meeting the King and Queen as she went, escorted by their knights. She tried to fathom how something so glorious could exist here, in the midst of such a wasteland: this castle was resplendent, with soaring ceilings, smooth cobblestone floors, and stained-glass windows letting in the two suns of the desert sky. In many ways, walking into this castle of the Ridge reminded her of walking into King's Court; she found the similarities to be eerie, almost as if a replica existed elsewhere in the world.

Lit up by the soft, muted glow filtering in through the windows were hundreds of onlookers, dressed in beautiful, elegant attire, gathering around on either side of the plush carpet to watch them pass. As Gwen and the others strolled down the carpet, all of these people stared at her, as if they were objects of curiosity. Clearly word of their arrival had spread quickly in this court, and the way they gawked at them, little children pressing up against their mothers' skirts, it was clear they never received visitors here, especially from beyond the Ridge. They looked at them as if they were aliens who had dropped out of the sky.

Gwen looked back at them, too; she took in their garb, their mannerisms, and she was incredibly impressed. This was clearly a refined, civilized society, women wearing beautiful silks and lace and the most intricate jewelry. All of them were tan, fit, healthy, and these people reminded her of the people she had seen in King's Court. Yet the resplendence here was even greater. It not only oozed wealth, but also strength and invincibility. Clearly this land had existed here for hundreds of years. In some odd way, it was so similar to the Ring, it was like returning home.

Yet on the other hand, it was also different. The people here had a similar look to those of the Ring, yet they wore their hair so differently, the men all with their stark-bald heads and long, bright blond beards, and the women with their straight, white-blond hair, some braided and some not. The boys wore heads of stark blond hair, and it seemed to Gwen that they only shaved them as they became men.

As they continued down the carpet, Gwen saw before her an immense golden and ivory throne, raised up on a platform, with several golden steps leading up. Atop it sat a man and a woman,

clearly their King and Queen. The King, perhaps in his forties, muscular, also had a shaved head, with a long, light golden beard. He wore a purple silk mantle, platinum chain mail armor, no shirt, and platinum wrist cuffs. Behind him stood a dozen warriors, hands resting on their swords.

The King stood as Gwen and her entourage got closer, and Gwen could see his rippling muscles as he rose to his full height and broadened his shoulders. He appeared to be the very emblem of strength, a man who had been named King by right, and not by inheritance. He had the body of a great warrior and he exuded an aura of power, control, and invincibility.

Yet he also smiled kindly, and Gwen could see the compassion and justice in his eyes—and immediately she felt at ease.

Gwen and the others came to a stop before him, perhaps twenty feet away, and the King slowly descended as the crowd fell completely silent. The King examined them, clearly in wonder at their presence.

"My King," said a voice, and Gwen looked over to see one of the King's counselors, with a long, gray beard, holding a staff, dressed in royal purple garb. "These are the strangers, my liege, that were found in the desert. These are the ones who have crossed the Ridge."

There came a gasp from the crowd, and Gwen could feel their eyes burning through her, looking at her and the others with burning curiosity. The King, too, looked them over, his sparkling gray eyes meeting Gwen's.

A long silence ensued, until finally the King cleared his throat. He looked at Kendrick.

"Are you the leader of this bunch?" he asked him, his voice deep, booming throughout the room, filled with authority.

Kendrick shook his head, and Gwen stepped forward.

"No," Gwen replied, her voice still raspy. "I am their Queen."

The King's eyes widened in surprise, as the crowd gasped.

"Queen?" he echoed, surprise in his voice. "Queen of what? No one has ever reached us from beyond the Ridge. This situation is quite extraordinary. At first we took you for deserters, but clearly that is not the case. Have you managed to truly cross the Great Waste? Have you come from another place?"

Gwen nodded back solemnly, meeting his eyes, and with a great effort, she managed to utter her next words with a raspy voice.

"We have, my liege," she replied. "We have come from across the sea."

A gasp came from the crowd, and the King's eyed widened as he examined her in wonder.

"Across the sea?" he asked, unbelieving.

Gwen nodded.

“We have fled our homeland, destroyed by the Empire. We are exiles from the Kingdom of the Ring.”

An even greater gasp spread through the crowd, as a long and astonished murmur erupted. Gwen could see shock register across the King’s face.

Finally, the crowd settled down, and the King addressed her.

“The existence of the Ring is rumored to be a myth,” he said, examining her skeptically. “A great land, in the midst of a vast ocean, protected by a canyon, shielded by a Sorcerer’s Ring. A mythical place, protected by this Ring from all danger, all harm. Is this the place from which you claim to hail?”

Gwendolyn nodded back solemnly.

“It was free from all harm,” she said, sadly, “once. But not anymore. This is why we stand here today. The Sorcerer’s Ring has been broken; the power that was once ours is no more, destroyed by Romulus, by another magical power. Our journey ever since has been a long and hard one. We have sailed across the sea to escape the Empire.”

The King looked back at her, puzzled.

“You have come to the Empire to escape the Empire?”

Gwendolyn nodded back.

“A leader must make difficult decisions in times of crisis,” she explained, “and that was the decision I made. Outnumbered, our days few, we needed to find the best hiding place—and thought of no better place to hide than within our enemy’s lap.” Gwen looked around. “A notion, my liege, that I am sure you and your people of the Ridge grasp.”

He smiled back.

“All too well,” he replied. He examined Gwen with a new respect. “So you are their leader.”

Gwen nodded.

“You see before you what remains of the Ring,” she replied. “My father was King before me and his father before him. We descend from a long line of MacGil Kings.”

The King himself gasped this time, as did the entire crowd with him. He stared back at her in shock.

“*MacGil*, did you say?” he asked.

Gwen nodded.

“*We* are MacGils,” the King said.

The crowd broke into an agitated murmur, as Gwen exchanged a shocked look with Kendrick and the others. She looked back at the King, startled, and for the first time, as she studied his face, his jawline, she began to see something subtle there that resembled her people.

“Centuries ago, we were one,” Aberthol said, stepping forward, his old voice gravelly. “The MacGils hail from the same family, on opposite sides of the sea.”

As the crowd murmured, the King examined her, rubbing his beard, processing it all.

“My King,” came a voice.

The King turned, and Gwen saw standing beside him a fearsome warrior, lines of worry etched across his forehead, the only among them wearing a long, black beard. He looked at Gwen and the others with disapproval.

“I sympathize with these strangers’ plight,” he said, as the room quieted, “yet you must not accept them here. Never before have we allowed strangers into the Ridge—surely they have left a conspicuous trail in the desert. That trail will lead to us. The Ridge has remained a secret, has never been discovered, because of our ancestors’ caution. If the Empire follows their trail, it could lead to our downfall. We must send them back from where they came, back out into the Great Waste, and let the Empire find them in the desert. The future of our land is a stake.”

There followed a long, tense silence, as the King’s expression darkened. He studied Gwen and the others, rubbing his beard, clearly disturbed by the decision before him.

Finally, he sighed, and as he began to speak, the room grew silent.

“We share the same bloodline,” the King said, looking at Gwendolyn. “The same ancestors. And even the same name. Hospitality is a sacred responsibility. I shall not send you back out into the desert. Whatever the risks.”

Gwen breathed a sigh of relief, and felt a rush of gratitude for this kind and brave King. She knew any other decision would mean her death sentence.

“You are welcome here,” the King added. “You will stay here. You will live with us, and become a part of our people. You will tell us your story, all about your lives, what led you are, your travails, your battles, your people—and we shall tell you of ours.

“But now is not the time. Now you will rest and recuperate, and when sun falls, we shall have a royal feast. I shall summon all of our families, and you shall tell us everything. In the meantime, our castle is yours, my friends.”

The King stepped forward, stopped before Gwen, placed both hands on her shoulders, leaned in, and kissed her forehead, then smiled as he leaned down and stroked Krohn. He turned to Kendrick, clasped his forearm, then went down the line, clasping each and every man’s forearm, looking each solemnly in the eye.

“My King,” Gwen said, “we graciously accept. But before I can rest and recover, I must tell you that we have come here on a dire mission.”

He looked back at her, curious, as the room fell silent once again.

“When we arrived in the Empire,” Gwen continued, “we were taken in with the greatest hospitality by a slave people on the outskirts of Volusia. Now led by Darius, they are in the midst of a great revolt, and face the Empire in battle. We have come all this way, have crossed the desert, on a solemn vow to find help, to ask that your armies to return with us, join Darius, and help ensure their freedom and destroy the Empire.”

The crowd murmured, long and agitated, and the King looked grimly back. He nodded to one of his councilors, who soon approached and held out a scroll to Gwendolyn.

“My Queen,” he said, as she took the piece of parchment. “This arrived on this morning’s eagle. News from Volusia: the people of whom you speak have all been ambushed, slaughtered. Not one remains.”

Gwendolyn read the scroll with shaking hands, and her heart started to break inside. She could not believe it. Dead. All of them. She immediately felt it was her fault, as if she had abandoned all of them. She felt like dying inside. Her driving sense of mission collapsed before her eyes.

“No!” cried a voice, and Gwen turned to see Sandara, weeping in Kendrick’s arms. “My brother!”

“I’m sorry, my Queen,” the King said. “But your home is here now. With us.”

With that, the King turned away and a horn was sounded. The crowd began to disperse, and Gwen stood there, feeling hollowed out, torn with mixed emotions. Would she ever find Thorgrin again? Guwayne?

And what, she wondered, would their future look like now?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Godfrey, awake, bleary-eyed, up all night long, slowly removed the red sash, holding his breath so as not to get infected by plague, lifting it over his head as he took in his surroundings in the dim pre-dawn light. All was finally quiet and still in the prison cell, the only sound that could be heard the breathing of the guard, steady and regular, and the gentle snoring of the prisoners. The time had come.

It had been one of the most harrowing nights of his life, reclining in a plague-infected pit, breathing into the red sash and trying his best to avert his mouth so as not to catch it. Godfrey sat up slowly, his muscles stiff, eagerly awaiting this moment all night. It had been a torturous night, one of the prisoners he'd been lying beside dying sometime during the night. Godfrey remembered the exact moment he had died, his face up against his, letting out one final gasp, his body quivering, then becoming stiff as a board. Godfrey had barely stopped himself from vomiting.

Godfrey had done his best to breathe in the opposite direction, and prayed to God with all his might that he didn't catch whatever plague this fellow had. Godfrey figured there wasn't much to lose: if he didn't manage to escape, he'd be executed within hours anyway.

Godfrey, thanks to his overbearing King father, had been thrown into dungeon cells one too many times, even if only for a few days, his father always trying to impart to him a lesson he could never quite learn. Alert to the rhythms inside a prison cell, Godfrey took in all the sounds and senses of the prison environment, making sure all was ready before he pounced. A prison, Godfrey knew, had its own unique sounds and rhythms: he knew the sound a prison made right before prisoners were about to riot; he knew the sounds that preceded a guard beating someone down; he knew the sound of a new prisoner entering a block, and he knew the sound of someone about to be dragged away.

And most importantly, he knew the sound of a guard falling asleep.

Godfrey turned and trained his eyes on the Empire guard, standing beside the prison cell, his head drooping down, chin meeting his chest, shoulders slumped and relaxed. Just the way Godfrey wanted them. His eyes focused on the keys, a small set of silver keys on the guard's waistband, and he knew the time was now.

Godfrey sat up stealthily, his body too heavy, wishing he'd lost fifty pounds. One of these days he'd quit drinking—but definitely not today. Godfrey slowly lowered the red sash and wrapped it instead around his waist; he knew it would come in handy later.

Godfrey slowly pushed himself up off the dead body, pushing off the plague-infested prisoner as he had been dying to do all night, elated to finally have his weight off of him, and then he slowly made his way to his knees. From there, he got to his feet, crouching. His legs had fallen asleep, and he gave them a moment to come back to life before he made his move.

Godfrey looked up and down the corridor, and saw no sign of any guards patrolling the halls. Of course, it made sense: it was the middle of the night, and one guard standing before a locked cell should have been sufficient—especially with prisoners as pathetic as Godfrey and his crew and the few other lost souls in there with them. Indeed, as Godfrey looked beyond the cell bars, he saw Akorth and Fulton fast asleep, even though he'd told them to stay awake, snoring so loudly that it gave him cover. For once, he was happy for their snoring.

Ario and Merek, though, thank God, had listened and they sat there, each to his corner, staring back with their haunted eyes, watching him, wide awake. Then again, Godfrey wondered if those two ever slept.

Godfrey darted across the prison corridor, arching his feet like a cat, moving as quietly as he could, impressed by his own silence. He made right for the guard's keys, and with shaking hands, he crouched down beside him and fumbled with the clip on his belt. He managed to unclip them, and as he did, he held the bunch of keys tightly together, so that they would not jingle. He quickly scanned them, figured out which was the right one, inserted it gingerly in the lock, and turned as quietly and softly as he could.

With the soft sound of a latch turning, the cell door opened, and Godfrey stared back, shocked, amazed it had all actually worked.

Merek and Ario, needing no prodding, were already at the door—but Godfrey gestured toward Akorth and Fulton, and Ario turned and hurried over to them, jabbing each roughly in the back and covering their mouths so they would not call out. They awkwardly got to their feet and begin to creep their way out the prison door.

Godfrey was impressed. Aside from Akorth and Fulton not being awake and ready, it was all going smoothly, according to the plan in his head. With a surge of optimism, he realized his crazy plan might actually work.

Just as they were all reaching the cell door, a prisoner at the back of the cell, an overweight man with a huge belly and narrow eyes, jumped to his feet.

"Where are you all going?" he boomed out. "Wait for me!"

Godfrey felt a flush of rage at the stupidity of this fellow, who made a racket as he clambered through the cell. His heart pounding, Godfrey began to turn to look to see if the guard had awakened.

He never had a chance. Godfrey felt the guard's strong hands grab the back of his hair and suddenly felt his head slamming into the iron bars, again and again, his head killing with each assault.

The loud prisoner rushed forward and tried to race out the open door, and as he did, the guard slammed it closed; the prisoner shrieked as his arm got flattened in it, stuck.

Finally, the guard released his grip, and Godfrey turned to see Ario running up behind him and kicking the back of the guard's knee, dropping him to one knee.

Merek then lunged forward and slammed the guard's head into the bars.

But this guard was invincible. He bounced back, reached around, grabbed Merek, and threw him, slamming him into the bars; he then wheeled around and elbowed Ario, knocking him down to the ground. Akorth and Fulton stood there, useless, and Godfrey knew he must act quick or else risk losing it all.

Godfrey remembered the red sash from his waist. As the guard turned his back to finish Merek off, Godfrey lunged forward, jumped on the guard's back, and wrapped the sash around the guard's neck. He grabbed on with all his might and pulled.

The guard went wild, groaning, spinning, running every which way—but Godfrey held on with all his might, squeezing, refusing to let go. He knew this sash was his lifeline.

The guard spun around and slammed his back, with Godfrey on it, into the iron bars again and again; Godfrey felt the wind knocked out of him, felt as if he were being crushed.

And yet still, to his credit, he hung on.

Merek regained his feet, rushed forward, and punched the guard in the gut. Finally, mercifully, he dropped to his knees, Godfrey still holding on.

Ario, Akorth, and Fulton all rushed forward, all kicking the guard, again and again and again, until he finally fell to his stomach.

Merek rushed forward, helped Godfrey grab the sash, and the two of them squeezed even harder.

Still, this guard, invincible, like an animal that just refused to die, kept gasping.

Finally, Ario pulled a small dagger from his belt, stepped forward calmly, took a knee, and stabbed the guard in the back of his neck.

Finally, he stopped moving.

Godfrey released his grip, his hands shaking, and the four of them all looked at each other in silence, all in shock at what just happened.

"Open this bloody door at once!" shouted the other prisoner, his arm still stuck in the door.

Godfrey stood and stared him down, enraged.

“You’re lucky I don’t kill you,” he said.

Godfrey turned with the others, and as one, the four of them, a hardened team now, ran down the corridors, gaining speed, twisting and turning, daylight up ahead.

“Where to now?” Ario asked, looking at Godfrey, finally with respect.

“Anywhere,” he replied, “but here.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ragon stood at the edge of the grassy knoll at the far end of the Isle of Light, and he looked out at the vast ocean before him, wondering where Thorgrin could be. He had left so abruptly, it had caught Ragon off guard—and rarely in his life had Ragon been caught off guard. Somehow, for the first time in his life, he had not foreseen it.

Ragon had been so certain of how things were going to play out: he had foreseen Thorgrin's arrival on the island, and had thought he had foreseen Thor's reuniting with Guwayne, though his vision on this had been hazy.

And yet he was certain he had never foreseen Thorgrin leaving so abruptly, especially in the middle of the night. At first he had been completely baffled as to why this had happened—until he had seen, high in the skies, the passing shadow, a demon unleashed from hell, and he realized exactly what had happened. Thorgrin had been deceived; he had been led astray, had fallen prey to one of the dark forces of the underworld. They must be very powerful forces, indeed, Ragon realized, if it could reach all the way to the Isle of Light and could affect a warrior and a druid like Thorgrin.

It all made Ragon fear for Thorgrin's future. What monumental powers could possibly be at work in the universe, could be using Thorgrin as their plaything? Why was Thorgrin so important that they would visit him personally? Thorgrin was clearly more powerful than Ragon had realized; he had underestimated his great destiny. He had underestimated him, and had underestimated the forces at work around him.

Guwayne, in Ragon's arms, began to cry, and Ragon rocked him, looking down into his eyes, gray like Thorgrin's.

"Shhhh."

Ragon rocked Guwayne, and Guwayne immediately fell silent. He felt the young child's warmth in his arms as he soothed him to sleep. He felt it a great honor to hold this child, of whom he had foreseen an even greater fate.

Yet Ragon was baffled that he was still holding Guwayne, that Thorgrin had not reunited with him and taken him away. He had expected to harbor Guwayne only for a short period of time, only until Thorgrin had returned. And now here he was, still with the child, while Thorgrin was out there somewhere searching for him. Ragon knew something wasn't right. A great wrong had been perpetuated in the universe, and Thorgrin, led astray, had to be set straight. He had to be given clarity and reunited with his boy.

Ragon looked up to the skies, saw Lycoples circling, and he closed his eyes and commanded her silently:

Go, my child.

High above there came a screech in response, and Lycoples circled, again and again, flying away—but then, curiously, turning back. Ragon was baffled; Lycoples had always obeyed his commands. And yet now, she seemed hesitant.

Go. Search the seas. Find Thorgrin. Bring him back to me.

Ragon opened his eyes and expected Lycoples to do his bidding—yet she would not go.

Ragon could not understand. Why would Lycoples be reluctant to leave? He could sense her trying to tell him something, and yet this, too, was obscured. Was he being kept in the dark? Did Lycoples foresee a dark future that he could not?

Ragon closed his eyes and tried to see the future, tried to see Thor returning, reuniting with Guwayne…. But for some reason, his vision was obscured. He could see nothing. Only blackness.

"GO!" Ragon shouted, his voice unearthly, firm, raising his voice and his staff. Guwayne started crying.

This time, Lycoples screeched in protest, then suddenly she turned, flapped her wings, and flew off into the horizon.

Ragon watched her go, fading into the scarlet sky, and despite himself, he could not help but feel as if some great darkness were coming.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Thor stood at the bow of the ship as they sailed through the black ocean night, sailing faster than they'd ever had, a strong wind at their back, as he peered out into the blackness and thought of his sister.

Alistair. Where are you?

They sailed through choppy waters, mist from the waves spraying his face, heading their way south, following Thor's instinct. Thor sensed Alistair was out there; he sensed her being in danger, so intense, it was as if she were right here with him. He knew that's where the dragon had been leading him, and he could be nowhere else until he'd helped her.

But what was she doing out here, on this vast and empty sea?

He tried to recall the last time he had seen her. She had been leaving the Ring, on her way south, to embark for the Southern Isles with Erec. She had seemed so happy, and so had he. The one point Thor had always found solace in since the destruction of the Ring was his sister, knowing she had gotten out before the invasion, knowing she was somewhere safe in the Southern Isles with Erec.

And now this. How could she possibly be here?

Thor did not know the answer. He did not need to—he had learned to trust his gut.

"Are you sure we head the right way?" came a voice.

Thor turned to see Angel standing beside him, looking up at him with eyes full of trust and hope.

Thor reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sure of nothing, Angel," he said, "only what my instinct tells me."

She nodded back, solemnly.

"That is as sure of anything as we can be," she replied.

As always, Thor was surprised by her wisdom; sometimes he felt when he talked to her as if he were speaking with an elderly man, filled with insight.

"Thor!" shouted a voice.

Thorgrin looked back to see O'Connor, standing high up on the mast, pointing into the darkness.

Thor turned and checked the horizon again, and he saw nothing.

But then, as they continued to sail, he began to see a faint glow in the horizon. He saw smoke, and smelled a fire at sea. He could see there wasn't land up ahead, so he was confused; he could not understand how there could be a fire.

Unless something else was out there. Ships. Ships caught on fire.

Thor's senses were heightened.

“FASTER!” Thor commanded. “Full sail!”

Reece, Elden, and Matus all worked the sails, and as they gained speed, Thor readied his weapons.

“Prepare yourselves!” Thor yelled out. “We sail into battle!”

As they neared, the clouds of smoke getting greater, perhaps a few hundred yards away, Thorgrin could begin to make out what was unfolding before them: there was a glow of flames, a fleet of ships on fire, and shouts of men. There were hundreds of Empire ships, an immense fleet, and within this fleet, he could see a half dozen other ships, blockaded but bursting free. And on these ships flew, his heart leapt to see, the banner of the Southern Isles.

Without even needing to see, Thor knew immediately that Alistair and Erec were on those ships, in danger, trapped by the Empire. He saw the Empire fleet drawing their bows, raising their arrows, aiming for Erec’s fleet, as they fired off volley after volley. He could see the massive ships that blocked their way, and could see that they were all about to be destroyed for good.

“Faster!” Thor commanded, feeling their sleek ship leaning into the wind, the spray getting stronger.

They were now fifty yards away and as they closed in, Thor realized they had an advantage: the Empire did not expect to be attacked from behind, from the open sea, and with all eyes turned inward, for Erec’s fleet, they had no one on watch even bothering to look.

Even so, it was not fast enough; Thor knew they would not reach them in time. His sister and Erec and all of their people would be killed.

Thor closed his eyes and focused, trying to sense his sister in the darkness.

The strangest thing happened. As they got closer, as he focused on his sister, Thor slowly felt a power welling within him, a greater power than he’d ever felt. It was as if being near Alistair enabled him to access his powers more easily. It shifted them, made them stronger.

Thor closed his eyes and felt the power surge within him, a joint power between him and Alistair, and as he raised both arms, he felt a power fly through them without even trying. He opened his eyes and directed his two palms, and from each there emitted a flaming orange ball of light. They shot through the air, each one aimed for each of the two massive Empire ships that blocked Erec’s escape.

The balls hit right before the archers could release their arrows. Each ship was rocked by an explosion, bursting into flames that lit up the entire night, and sending chunks of wood splintering, flying up in the air and raining down into the sea in every direction.

The two ships immediately splintered, began to list, and to sink

quickly into the sea.

Erec, seeing his opportunity, raised his sails and rammed right through the remains of the flaming debris, creating a passageway for the rest of his ships, all sailing single file behind him.

Within moments they were out the other side, joining Thorgrin's ship, coming up beside them.

Thorgrin looked out into the astonished faces of Alistair and Erec and all his men, lit up by the torchlight, and they all looked back at him, astonished. Alistair's face was aglow with tears.

"Thorgrin!" she called out.

He could see their faces fall in relief.

But there was no time for a reunion. Thor joined Erec's fleet as he immediately turned his ship around and set sail with them, fleeing from the Empire.

Behind them, the hundreds of Empire ships gave chase. Thor looked over his shoulder and saw them bearing down and knew, as they all headed out to the open sea, that they had little hope of escape. But at least they were together. And if need be, they would all fight, together, to the death.

They sailed and sailed through the night, Thor pushing his sleek pirate ship to go as fast as it could, and Alistair and Erec keeping up beside him. A fog had descended, coming in and out, and as it momentarily cleared, Thor checked back over his shoulder, as he did every few minutes, and saw the Empire fleet was still there, but a few hundred yards away. They just could not lose them; in fact, they were slowly but surely closing the gap. Thor and the others were lucky to have a strong wind at their backs now—but if that wind were to die, he knew, they would all be surrounded and killed.

Worse, Thor was spent from his use of energy, from those fireballs, and while he tried to summon more power, this time when he closed his eyes, nothing came. He knew he had no other option but to fight them hand to hand, man to man—and that, he knew, was a fight he could not win.

Thor looked over the ship, and he took assurance in seeing Alistair's face, so calm, tranquil, standing beside Erec; Thor sensed that together, with their powers combined, there was no danger they could not face.

Yet as the Empire ships closed in, the air filled with the sound of arrows whizzing by, and Thor and the others took cover.

"They're in range!" Ere called out.

A sea of arrows and spears descended upon them, and Erec's men cried out, as too many were hit, falling over the rail.

There came a shriek beside Thor, and he looked over, horrified, to see his friend Reece kneeling beside him, an arrow stuck in his chest.

Thor's heart stopped to see the wound. He knew, without a doubt, that it was fatal.

"Hang in there," Thor said to Reece, holding his head. "You're going to be OK!"

There came a great bang, and Thor suddenly felt the ship hit something hard, the bottom of it scraping, as if sailing over something—then just as quickly, it disappeared. Thor looked at the others and they looked back at him, equally baffled.

Yet as it happened again, Thor rushed to the rail and looked down at the waters, and he was shocked by what he saw: there, before them, spread out as far as the eye could see, were shallow shoals, rocks interspersed in the water, every fifty feet or so. He looked up and, through the fog, he saw them reaching as far as the eye could see. As he peered through the fog, Thor saw something else that surprised him. There was a huge rock formation rising up out of the ocean, and within one of the massive boulders was the entrance to a cave, its arched entrance tall enough to hide their ships. He looked beyond it, and saw another cave—then another. While there was no land in sight, this entire stretch of ocean was filled with shoals and caves, strange rock outcroppings in the midst of the ocean.

Thor had an idea.

"What about the caves?" Thorgrin yelled out across the rail, to Erec and Alistair.

They looked out and examined them, too.

"If we can hide in them, maybe they will pass us by," Thor added.

Erec checked back over his shoulder, then shook his head.

"They're too close," he called back. "They would see us."

Alistair reached out and laid a hand on Erec's wrist, and he looked over at her.

"There are other ways," she replied.

Alistair stepped forward, looked at Thorgrin, and held a single palm out toward his boat.

"My brother," she called out to Thor, "bring your boat closer. Raise your palm and join mine."

Thorgrin directed his boat, and they sailed closer, and as he came to the edge of his boat and did as she said, holding one palm out for hers, he felt a tremendous heat rise from it.

As all the others watched, transfixed, brother and sister joined palms—and slowly, a white light began to form between them. The light began to morph, to take the shape of a cloud, and it began to sweep through all the ships at once, then pass behind them.

Thor looked back and saw that it formed a perfect wall of fog behind their fleet, obscuring them all from Empire view.

"To the cave!" Alistair called out.

All the ships turned and sailed together into the cave, deeper and deeper. It was quiet in here, and lit up by the strange, light-blue waters, reflecting off its walls, providing enough light to see by.

As the last of their ships sailed in, Alistair held out her palm, and she and Thor joined palms again.

Again the cloud appeared, and this time it concealed the entrance of the cave—and then, the entire cave itself.

Thor heard the sound of the Empire fleet, just beyond the cave, cutting through the waters, sailing right past them.

They had no idea they were there.

Finally, he breathed a big sigh of relief.

They had done it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Darius sat in the small stone courtyard with the other gladiators, elbows on his knees, head in his hands, nursing a terrible headache. He leaned back slowly, checking his body as he twisted and turned, and he felt a thousand shooting pains. Covered in scrapes and bruises and cuts, he felt as if he had been run over by a boulder after that fight in the arena. His hands felt swollen, stiff, and it hurt them just to open them. His limbs, too, felt stiff as he tried to stretch his elbows, to lean back, and he wondered how he'd be able to fight again. He needed time to recover, and he had a sinking feeling that he would not get it.

As Darius looked about, he felt a sense of sorrow and guilt than hurt him more than his wounds. He saw Raj and Desmond and Luzi sitting nearby, all nursing wounds, each staring into the void. Darius assumed that they, like he, were mourning Kaz.

Darius felt a pit in his stomach as he thought of him. He and Kaz had practically grown up together, had trained for countless days together, Kaz always the biggest and strongest of them all, always winning every competition. At first, Kaz had even been somewhat of a bully.

But over time, he and the others had bonded with Kaz, who had always been there for him, and who now had laid down his life for Darius. Death now hung over all of them, now a reality, as his group of friends had shrunk from four to three. He knew that death could come for any one of them—and that nothing could stop it.

Darius sensed that the others were thinking the same thing as they sat there, staring, nursing wounds. He saw several of the boys who had joined them in the arena were also missing, dead, and he knew their dwindling ranks did not bode well. It was a small miracle, he realized, that they had won the first match. They might not get so lucky the next time, he knew. He felt sure that the Empire would throw at them even more intense opponents, more intense weaponry. They wanted a spectacle, and it would only be a matter of time until he, and all of the others, died here in this place, as objects of entertainment for the Empire.

Darius sneered, hating the thought. He had always wanted to die in battle, on the open field, fighting for a cause he cherished. Not this way. Not as a captive for a savage's spectacle.

Darius saw the despondent faces on all the other gladiators, boys he did not know, their faces scratched up, their bodies scarred from the bout, and he suspected they felt the same. They all stared into nothingness as if staring at their looming deaths. All of them sitting

here, waiting to die.

Darius closed his eyes and shook his head. He no longer feared death. A part of him, he felt, had really died back there, with his men, when they were ambushed inside the walls of Volusia. His heart was still with his dead brother, whom he had led to slaughter. A part of him felt as if he had no more right to live.

Darius was startled by the sudden slam of an iron cell door, and he looked up to see the Morg strutting into the courtyard, accompanied by several large Empire guards. He glared down at all of them disapprovingly.

"None of you should imagine for a moment that you will survive this," he boomed out, looking at each and every one of them. "You got lucky today, with only a few of you dead. But tomorrow will be another day, and most, if not all of you, should die."

He surveyed their faces.

"Only one of you will survive this, if any of you. The last man standing after the third match, if any of you even make it that far, will be granted his freedom—of sorts. He will be shipped off to the Empire capital, where he will fight in the grandest arena known to the Empire. It is not quite freedom; it is more of a delayed death. Because for true freedom you would have to win there, too—and no one ever has. They make sure of it."

Morg's eyes stopped scanning as they fell on Darius. His scowl deepened as he took several steps forward and locked eyes with him.

"You fought well today," he said. "I'm surprised. I didn't think you had it in you. You're useful to me as an object of entertainment. For that I'm going to reward you: I will bring you to a separate arena, where you will have a chance to fight alone, unchained, in matches for entertainment, and not for the death. You will live many years and be treated well."

Darius, feeling a great injustice rising within, stood his ground and faced Morg.

"I will leave this place," Darius replied, "only if my brothers can join me. Otherwise I will stay behind, and fight with them."

Morg looked at Darius, disbelieving, and his scowl deepened.

"The offer is for you only—not for your friends. If you remain behind, you will die with them."

Darius clenched his jaw.

"Then I shall die with them," he replied, unwavering.

Morg's eyes widened.

"You would die then, for your friends?"

Darius stared back.

"If I abandon my friends," he replied, "then I have never truly lived."

Morg shook his head, grimaced, then spat at Darius's feet.

"I will enjoy watching you die tomorrow," he said. "You, and all your friends."

"Don't enjoy it quite yet," Raj chimed in. "He might just surprise you. And if he does—I am sure he will kill you first."

Morg smiled, a cruel smile, turned, and stormed from the courtyard, his men falling in behind him, the iron door slamming behind them as they left.

"You should not have done that," Luzi said, coming over to him.

"You should have taken your freedom," Desmond said.

Darius shook his head and remained silent.

"No man left behind," he replied. "Not now, not ever. That's what friendship means."

Darius could see the respect and gratitude in his brothers' eyes, as each stepped forward and clasped his forearm.

"You bring great honor to Kaz's memory," Desmond said.

A look of worry etched across Luzi's face.

"I still can't believe Kaz is dead," Luzi said. "I don't understand it. He was the biggest and strongest of us all. If he has been killed, what hope is there for any of us?" His face morphed into panic. "I have to get out of here," he added. "I have to get out of here!"

Luzi ran across the courtyard and began pounding on the iron door. Darius watched him, surprised, as he began to realize that Luzi was having a nervous breakdown.

"Shut him up!" one of the other boys yelled. "He keeps banging like that and they'll come back and kill us all!"

"You should have let me kill him back in the arena," uttered a dark voice.

Darius turned to see Drok standing beside him, glaring back through his narrow eyes.

"It would have been clean and smooth," he added. "And I only would have had to kill him once."

Darius was filled with a fresh wave of rage as he recalled Drok's attempt to kill Luzi back in the arena.

Drok began to strut across the courtyard, toward Luzi, and Darius rushed across the courtyard, forgetting all his pain, and stood between them, blocking his way. He stared Drok down, and Drok looked back in surprise.

"To get to him you'll have to go through me," Darius said.

The boy grimaced back at Darius.

"I should have killed you back there, too," Drok said. "I will be glad to do it now—you and your pathetic little friend."

Drok charged Darius, and as he did, he furtively reached down, grabbed a handful of dirt off the floor, and threw it into Darius's eyes.

Darius, not expecting it, was temporarily blinded, and the next thing he knew he felt strong arms around his waist, tackling him, driving him down to the ground. He fell backwards and hit the ground hard, every muscle in his body sore, as the boy wrestled pinned him down.

All the other boys immediately gathered around.

"FIGHT!" they shouted. "KILL HIM!"

After Drok's performance in the arena, his attempt to kill the other boys, Darius knew they were cheering for him.

Darius struggled to get the sand out of his eyes, to catch his breath, and he felt hard knuckles across his cheek as Drok punched him in the face, again and again.

As he swung again, Darius reached up and this time caught his wrist in midair; at the same time, he managed to roll, getting on top of Drok, and punched him in the face twice.

Drok kicked Darius between the legs, leaned down, and head-butted him, and Darius felt a world of pain as the boy rolled back on top. Darius swung around and elbowed him across the jaw, and the boy collapsed beside him.

Darius rolled out from under him and caught his breath.

Desmond, Raj, and Luzi appeared, each grabbing the boy from behind and yanking him to his feet, each grabbing one arm.

Darius gained his feet and stared him down.

"Finish him off," Desmond said.

"Finish him off for good," Luzi chimed in.

"KILL HIM!" the other boys chanted.

Darius looked long and hard at the boy, struggling to break free, and realized that he could kill him. Not here. Not while he was captive.

"No," Darius replied. "Let him go."

The second they let him go, Drok lunged for Darius, snarling, blood dripping from his mouth. He rushed to tackle him, but this time, Darius, prepared, waited for the last moment then stepped aside. As Drok rushed by, Darius reached back and elbowed him across the jaw.

Drok fell face-first into the dirt.

He lay there, moaning, and Darius saw him reach out and close his fingers around a handful of dirt, and Darius realized this time that he was about to throw another fistful of sand.

Darius stepped on the boy's wrist, pinning it to the ground, right before he could spin around and throw the sand. Darius leaned back and kicked the boy with his other boot in the face, knocking him onto his back.

But Drok was hardy. He rolled and rolled, got to his feet, and stood there, facing Darius, bloody but indestructible. He turned and

raced for the wall, grabbed a wooden training sword off the rack, and faced Darius.

"Darius!" came a voice.

Darius turned to see Raj throw him a wooden sword; he caught it in midair and raised it just in time to block Drok's first blow.

Darius and Drok sparred back and forth with a great clacking of wood, slashing and parrying, pushing each other back and forth. Darius had to hand it to the boy: he was quick and relentless and driven by hatred.

Yet he was not as fast as Darius. Darius's training with Raj and Desmond came back to him, and he put all his skills to good use, slashing and striking a hair faster than Drok, and was about to land a blow—when Drok caught Darius off guard and swept his foot out from under him.

Darius stumbled and fell on his back and Drok immediately raised his sword, lunged forward, grabbed its hilt, and brought the point straight down for Darius's throat.

Darius rolled out of the way at the last second, the tip went into the dirt, and he swung around and knocked the sword from Drok's hand, then regained his feet.

Drok, in a rage, took his wooden sword and broke it over his knee, making its tip jagged, then charged and screamed, aiming to plunge his sword right through Darius's heart.

Darius waited and waited, calm and collected, then at the last second he stepped aside and elbowed Drok across the throat, knocking him flat on his back.

Drok lay there, unmoving, and as he slowly reached for his wooden sword, Darius kicked it out of the way.

Darius knelt down beside him, grabbed the jagged sword, and held the sharp end to Drok's throat. His hands trembled as he pondered whether to kill him.

"KILL HIM!" the other boys yelled, gathering around.

Drok grimaced back, blood pouring from his mouth.

"Do it," Drok urged. "You'd be doing me a favor."

Darius finally threw the sword away.

"No," Darius said, "I shall not do you that favor. It would be dishonorable to kill you while you are defenseless. And I shall not sully my honor, not even for the likes of you."

Darius stood and grimaced down.

"The arena shall decide who shall live and who shall die," he concluded. "And if there be a true God out there, tomorrow, you shall die."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Volusia stood on the balcony, atop the immense golden dome that rose from the center of the capital, and watched the horizon with growing interest. There, rising up in a cloud of dust, was an entourage of seven black chariots, born by the largest black horses she'd ever seen, bursting through the desert day. What surprised her most was not the size of the carriages, or the horses—or even their speed—but the fact that the legions of Empire soldiers camped outside her city parted ways for them immediately. A sea of bodies opened up, deferred to these oncoming carriages, and Volusia realized that clearly, this entourage of people, whoever they were, were given a great deal of respect.

The carriages continued charging, right for the capital gates, and Volusia wondered who could be so insolent as to think they could approach.

"Who heads for our gates?" she asked Koolian, one of her sorcerers, who stood beside her with a dozen other advisors, studying the horizon.

He cleared his throat, a grave look on his face.

"Goddess," he replied. "Those before you are the Knights of the Seven. They represent the four horns and two spikes of the Empire, and are the direct representatives of the Great Council. They represent the collective force and negotiating power of all the Empire."

"There is little that all Horns and Spikes agree on, Goddess," Aksan, her assassin, said, stepping forward on her other side, "but if there is one thing they share in common, it is the Great Council. A word from the Great Council is a word from all the Empire. One dare not defy them. One cannot defy them."

"You would be wise to host them graciously, Goddess," her commander, Gibvin said.

Volusia watched as the gleaming black carriages tore through the desert, right for her gates, so proud, so regal—and so arrogant—clearly not expecting anyone or anything to get in their way.

"And what, do you suppose, they want with me?" she asked.

"They only come for one reason," said Gibvin, "to dictate terms. They will make you an offer, and they will only make it once. Whatever it is, you would be wise to accept it, Goddess."

She turned to him defiantly.

"This is not just the capital's council," he said. "This is the Great Council, of all the men. They represent not just one city, but tens of thousands. They do not just have armies—they have sorcerers, too, as powerful as yours—and an infinite number of men to lose. I implore

you—do not provoke the beast."

Volusia studied him, calm, expressionless, then turned back and watched the entourage approach the golden doors of her capital.

Her soldiers, down below, looked up at her, waiting for a response.

A thick silence hung in the air, as Volusia stared down, debating.

"Goddess, I beg you," Gibvin said. "Do not keep them waiting. Open those doors at once."

Volusia waited some more, the entire city so silent one could hear a pin drop, then finally, when she felt ready, she slowly nodded.

The gates were opened at once, and the chariots raced in, right for the golden dome, for her, as if they knew, without a doubt, that she would let them in.

* * *

Volusia sat around the Grand Council table, opposite the representative of the Knights of the Seven, and studied him with curiosity. He was not at all been what she had been expecting. She had expected a great warrior of the Empire race, a hardened man, large, strong, donning armor, bearing weaponry.

Yet she saw before her a simple man—a human being, no less—with intelligent eyes, wearing a brown robe, hands folded neatly inside them. He sat there calmly, looking back at her expressionless, perhaps a slight smile on his face, as if he had no fears in the world. And yet somehow, Volusia found his calm demeanor even more fearful than all the great warriors of the Empire. She sensed he was a man with unlimited powers at his disposal, who meant every word he said.

"You are very brave to come here with no guards," she said, breaking the silence.

He laughed.

"I am a delegate of the Knights of the Seven," he replied. "I don't need guards. No one would be foolish enough to attack me."

Keeping his smile, he cleared his throat and nodded gently.

"Goddess," he said, "I have not come for threats. I don't believe them. Nor have I come to bargain. I come only to utter the truth as we see it. You have started a great war here. You've taken by force several divisions of the Empire army, and the Empire capital. You have killed the Grand Council of the capital city, and along with them, thousands of men. You rule the capital now," he said, and sighed. "And yet even you must realize, you rule it by force. Not by the choice of the Empire."

“By force,” she repeated. “The same way Romulus and Andronicus before him ruled it.”

He nodded, smiling.

“True,” he countered. “And neither of those men are standing here today.”

She nodded back, conceding his point.

“What you don’t know,” he continued, “what no one knows, is that even the greatest, the most powerful, Empire leader answers to someone. And that someone is *us*.”

She examined him coolly, this man, so soft-spoken, yet with something about him that sent a chill up her spine.

“Out with it,” she snapped, impatient. “Are you threatening, then, to take power from me?” she asked, her voice hardened steel.

He smiled.

“As I mentioned, I don’t threaten. Besides, in you, we, the Knights of the Seven, see something much more interesting.”

She looked back, curious.

“As fate would have it,” he said, “you represent a chance to finally unite the Empire. Romulus and Andronicus were savages, ill-tempered generals who seized the throne by brute force. You, of course, are no princess, either—and are, in fact, from what I’ve heard, quite savage, too.”

He examined her.

“Yet you are young and beautiful,” he added, “you ruled Volusia, as your mother did before you, and the masses, at least, can be deluded by your appearance, by your pedigree, into thinking you are a pure and rightful leader. Leadership, after all, is all about perception, is it not?”

He smiled as he studied her, and Volusia narrowed her eyes, wondering where he was going with this.

“Then you have not come here with a threat?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“I have come to offer you rulership—bonafide rulership—of the Empire,” he said. “On behalf of the four Horns and two Spikes. A rulership spanning half the Empire. From here all the way to the Espian River shall be yours. The Espian and beyond, the Knights of the Seven shall rule. Our offer gives you more lands than you could ever dream. You will also have a life of peace, and rest assured our armies—all of our armies—shall be yours.”

He got up and walked to the window, looking out.

“Look outside,” he said. “Outside these city walls, hundreds of thousands of men remain of the Empire’s armies. They camp out there, waiting to avenge their commander, and they shall never forget.

“Behind them are millions more. Agree to my terms, and those

men you see will lay down their arms and answer to you. Romulus's million men, too, on the way home as we speak from the Ring, will defer to your command. As will the millions more men spread out amongst the Horns and Spikes. You will have no more worries, no more fears, and everything you'd ever wanted will be yours."

He turned and faced her, his eyes aglow.

"Agree now," he said, "and become Supreme Ruler."

He removed a long papyrus scroll from inside his shirt, unrolled it, and placed it on the table before her. He held out a seal, for her to stamp it, dripping with hot wax.

Volusia, dozens of her councilors watching, walked slowly over to him, the room thick with silence.

Volusia took the stamp and examined it.

"You offer me half the Empire," she said, staring at the seal. "But a Goddess does not rule half the world. A Goddess rules all of it."

She looked down at him, her eyes piercing, and he met her stare.

"I will have all of the Empire," she commanded. "Even if they are lands, as you say, that I will never reach, never see, never feel, never touch—I shall know that *all* is mine. You may return to your Seven and give them this message: they have one chance to lay down their arms."

He laughed aloud, then shook his head slowly as he rolled up his seal.

"I had expected you to be wiser," he said. "You realize, of course," he added, "that you and all your men will die."

Now it was her turn to smile.

"Everybody dies," she says. "But not everybody lives."

Volusia took the wax and, still smiling, suddenly stepped forward and crammed the burning hot seal into his forehead.

He shrieked and tried to resist, as the insignia of the Empire was burned into his forehead, but she grabbed the back of his head and held it, pushing deeper and deeper. When she was done, the emblem engraved, she reached up with both arms and in one clean motion, twisted his neck, snapping it.

He dropped, lifeless, down to her feet.

The entire room was silent, shocked, unable to believe what they had just witnessed.

She looked up at her men.

"Cut his body into six parts," she ordered, her voice dark and commanding, "and send them to the four Horns and two Spikes of the Empire. The head—send to the Seven."

She smiled wide.

"I want them to receive my response personally."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Gwendolyn woke in luxurious bedding, awakened by the distant, gentle song of the birds, a light breeze stirring through the drapes and into her chamber—and for a moment she forgot where she was. She opened her eyes and stretched in bed, feeling more comfortable than she ever had, feeling as if she had slept for a million years, and she remembered: the Ridge. She was in the King's castle.

Gwen sat up, collecting herself. It was the first time she had slept anywhere comfortably since abandoning the Ring, and as she turned and looked out at the gentle rays of sunset washing over the kingdom of the Ridge, she realized she'd slept most of the day. After the encounter with the King and being led to her luxurious quarters, she'd expected only to lie down and rest her head for an hour or so. Yet now she realized so much time had passed. After that long trek through the Great Waste, she must have, she realized, been exhausted.

Gwen had found waiting for her an assortment of delicacies in the room—cakes and dates, nuts and fruits of every kind, jugs of water and juices—and the first thing she had done was to share it all with Krohn, who lay now curled up in a ball, content, at the edge of her bed, sleeping well for the first time in as long as she could remember. She rose from the bed and crossed the room, the cobblestones smooth on her bare feet, reached a cistern, and splashed cold water on her face several times. She took a fresh fig, sitting beside the cistern, and ate it as she moved to the arched open window, the curtains billowing in the breeze. It was delicious, and filled her with energy.

Gwen looked out at this glorious city, and was even more impressed than when she'd entered it: it was magnificent. Sunlight streamed down, lighting up orchards as far as she could see, interspersed with ancient stone buildings. Formal gardens extending from the castle all the way through the city's streets, this entire place overflowing with abundance. Citizens, donning purple capes and fine silks, strolled about the gardens leisurely. It was overwhelming.

As Gwen looked out at the horizon, she felt overwhelmed with a sense of sadness and loss. In her mind she could not stop hearing the King's words, his pronouncement that Darius and all of his people were dead, and she felt consumed by loss. She had been driven her to cross the desert, to survive, for their sake, to rally an army to come back and help them. She had given them her word. And now that she had found this place, there was no cause left to return to. Even though she knew she had done her best, she felt as if somehow she had abandoned them. She hated the idea of that Empire village, of all those good men and women and children who had taken them in, all

slaughtered at the hands of the Empire. It made her feel a sense of hopelessness, as if the Empire could never be defeated.

Gwendolyn thought of her brother, Godfrey, of the last time she'd seen him, venturing out to the city of Volusia, against all odds, to help the cause. She wondered if he had survived. She shook her head, knowing that he, too, must surely be dead, and the thought pained her to no end. If she had known all of this would come to pass, she never would have ventured out, but would have stayed back there with them. Gwen always seemed to survive, while others around her, those she loved, perished. The sense of guilt Gwen felt hanging over her was growing stronger.

She studied the skies as brushed away a tear, and what pained her most of all, more than all of this, was the thought of Guwayne out there, somewhere in the seas, alone—if he was even alive. And, of course, of Thorgrin. She would give anything to know that they were both alive, that they were safe. She had a troubling thought: even if by some chance they did return to the Empire, how could they possibly know where she was, now that she was here, in the middle of the Great Waste, concealed behind a sand wall, behind the Ridge? What if they returned and could not find her? Would she ever be reunited with them again?

As Gwendolyn considered this new place, she wondered if life could go on. Could they ever pick up the pieces, rebuild here? Would she ever even want to without Thorgrin and Guwayne by her side? Would she have the strength to go on?

The Ridge was a beautiful place, and she felt blessed to be here, to be alive. But it was not her home, not the Ring. Would she ever see the Ring again?

As she saw the setting sun, the King's feast, she recalled, was but a few hours away, and she was glad she had woken up in time for it. She wanted time to get ready; after all, she looked forward to meeting the King's family, his entire court. She was dying to know more about this place, more about their common ancestors and history. The fact that the Ridge even existed was still like a dream to her. After having trekked through the Great Waste, through so much waste and emptiness and desolation, Gwen could hardly believe that there was any place left in the world. She would have gladly accepted even a small cave for shelter. But to find this place—it was more than she could possibly conceive.

Gwendolyn heard a soft crying, as if to match her own thoughts and her own pensive mood, and she looked out and in the distance, far below, in the royal gardens, she spotted Sandara, with Kendrick, both of them sitting on a marble bench, Kendrick with an arm around her as she wept. Gwendolyn sensed immediately what she was

weeping for: the loss of Darius, her brother. She felt her suffering and misery, and she sympathized with it.

Gwendolyn felt the need to comfort her. She threw on a robe, and as Krohn rose and followed her, she hurried out of her chamber, through the stone castle corridors, and down the spiral staircase, on the way to the royal gardens.

Gwendolyn burst out of the castle, Krohn at her heels, and entered the gardens, overwhelmed at their beauty. It was so quiet here, so peaceful, especially as the sun set. The scent of flowers was heavy in the air, and the sound of exotic birds singing filled her ears. She walked through perfectly trimmed hedges, until she rounded the bend and came upon Kendrick and Sandara.

They turned at her approach, and as they started to stand, Krohn ran over to them and jumped on Kendrick, and licked Sandara's face. Sandara could not help but smile.

Gwendolyn looked at Kendrick, saw how gaunt his face was, and Sandara's, and felt an immediate pang of guilt. All those days of not eating or drinking had taken their toll on all of them—they all looked like walking skeletons. At least, Gwen consoled herself, they had survived.

Kendrick came over and gave her a hug, as did Sandara, all of them bound by an invisible bond, all of whom had suffered so much together.

"I'm sorry, my lady," Sandara said.

"For what?"

"For my tears," she replied. "I should be grateful. We have survived. You led us all to survival."

Gwendolyn slowly shook her head, understanding.

"Not all of us have," she said. "We mourn for those who have not. You mourn for your brother, yes?"

Sandara nodded, her eyes welling with tears, and Gwendolyn draped an arm about her shoulder as Sandara cried. Gwendolyn cried too, but not for the same reason. Her mind filled with thoughts of Thorgrin, of all that she had left behind. It was all the stress of the last moons, she realized, finally leaving her body.

"Your brother was a noble warrior," Gwendolyn said. "He gave your people a taste of freedom. He died with honor."

"Thank you, my Queen," she said, "but I refuse to believe he is dead."

Gwendolyn looked back at her, surprised.

"Darius is not one to go down easily," Sandara added. "I can't believe it, in my heart, that they're all wiped out. I believe he lives. I can feel it."

"You are just exhausted, my love," Kendrick said, draping an arm

over her.

"I can believe what I wish," she snapped, shrugging off his hand. "Until I see his body, I will not believe it. My lady," she said, turning to Gwen, "he needs our help. We must go back for them. We must help him!"

Gwen looked to Kendrick, who blushed, seeming embarrassed.

Gwen sighed,

"I feel for you," she said to her. "But I cannot take us back, even if I chose, even if your brother were alive. We are in no position to go back ourselves—indeed, we are lucky to have survived. Losing a brother is an awful, terrible thing. But we are alive. We need to protect what we have left, and be thankful for that."

Sandara burst into more tears and she turned and walked off, crying, disappearing amongst the royal gardens.

Kendra turned to his sister apologetically.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be," she replied. "I understand grief. It is illogical; it is all-consuming; and it demands a target for your anger."

"These people of the Ridge," Kendrick said, looking off reflectively, "do you think we can trust them?"

Gwendolyn was having the same thoughts.

"It seems so," she said.

Kendrick nodded.

"It's uncanny," he said, "the similarities between here and the Ring, halfway across the world. It's almost as if we were one family, split apart."

He paused.

"Will we ever return to the Ring?" he asked, his voice filled with hope, and at that moment he sounded like she'd remembered him as a little boy.

Gwen looked at him, could see the longing his eyes, could see that he pined for home as much she did, and that he, too, was expecting to never return.

She sighed, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Maybe, my brother," she said, "this shall be our new home."

* * *

Gwen sat alone in the royal gardens as the sun fell, Kendrick having left long ago, enjoying the quiet, reflecting—when she heard the branches rustle and turned to find a young, pretty girl walking her way, her face filled with a mix of determination and anxiety. As she neared, Gwen saw that it was Stara, looking down, lost in her

thoughts, too. As she looked at her, Gwen marveled that but a few moons ago she had almost been wed in a double wedding with Thorgrin, Reece, and Selese—all cut short because of Stara and her love for her brother. Yet that wedding had never come to pass—and how much had changed so quickly. Stara looked now like the survivor of a war, lost without Reece, and lost without her family of the Upper Isles—especially her brother Matus.

"My Queen," Stara said, surprised to see her.

"Stara," Gwen replied, happy to see a familiar face, and happy to see that she had survived. Gwen still harbored some ill feelings toward her because of Selese—and yet, Reece loved Stara, and that was good enough for her.

"I miss your brother dearly," Stara said.

"I miss Reece dearly, too," Gwen said.

"Do you think he lives?" Stara asked.

Gwen sighed.

"If he does not, then it is likely Thorgrin does not—and that is not a picture I would like to imagine," she replied.

Stara nodded.

"I was set to marry Reece," she said. "I still intend to. Every day I don't see him, it breaks my heart. I must see him—I *need* to see him."

Gwendolyn nodded, understanding.

"I miss Thorgrin as much as you do Reece," she replied. "Yet they are out at sea, and we are here. There is nothing I can do."

"There *is* something you can do," Stara rebuffed, suddenly fierce, determined.

Gwen was taken aback by her passion.

"We can leave this place," Stara said. "We can find an ocean—any ocean—and set sail for them. Not only can we do it—we *must* do it. There is no way back here for Thorgrin and Reece. How are they ever supposed to find us now?"

Stara began to cry, and Gwen, hearing her torment, laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"I understand how you feel," she said, "but we will never find them at sea. We must stay here until they find us. You must have faith."

Stara looked at her with tear-filled eyes.

"I have little room left for faith," she replied. "Faith has been cruel to me. Reece is my life. Without him, I can't function, I can't survive. I can think of nothing else. I want to be with him. I cannot wait any longer."

"I am sorry," Gwen said, "but you have no choice."

Stara shot back a determined, hard look.

"There is *always* a choice," Stara said.

As she turned and stormed off, Gwen watched her go and had a sinking feeling that Stara was about to make a very bad decision.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Reece lay gravely wounded on the ship, deep inside the luminescent cave, Thorgrin and the others by his side, as he writhed in pain from his wound. The fog still hung heavy in the air, and their fleets remained well-hidden by the wall of fog. Reece knew he should be grateful for that.

But he was not feeling grateful right now. He felt a searing pain across his ribs, and he looked down and saw the gash from the arrow in his chest, bleeding badly. It had been pulled out, and his bandages ever since had been soaked with blood. He was in agony, and knew it did not bode well; he sensed he did not have much longer to live.

Reece looked up into Selese's eyes, and she stared down at him, her eyes such a beautiful shade of blue, wide open, looking down at him like an angel. She had taken on an ethereal quality ever since she'd risen from the Land of the Dead, had an almost luminescent aura to her that matched the aura of this cave. It was as if a part of her were here, and a part of her still lingered down below.

Reece loved her so much that what hurt him most about the idea of dying was leaving her. Finally, they had been reunited again, only for him, ironically, to be the one to die.

Reece looked up and saw Thorgrin and his Legion brothers, too, huddled around him, concern in their eyes. Moans hung in the air, and Reece knew he hadn't been the only one injured; he had seen dozens of wounded laid out on Erec's ships. Dozens more, dead, were cast overboard, the soft splashing punctuating the nighttime air. They had achieved freedom, for now, but at a heavy price.

And he most of all. Of all the ways to die, Reece had never wanted to be killed by an anonymous arrow. He wanted to go down in battle, facing his enemy, hand to hand. He squeezed Selese's soft hand, and he remembered her, remembered how much he'd wanted to marry her. He was not ready yet.

Another pain wracked his body.

Thorgrin, kneeling over him, clasped his arm.

"Do not leave us, my brother," Thorgrin said. "We have many battles left to fight together."

Selese squeezed her hand in his, her eyes filled with tears.

"You cannot leave me," she said, applying a damp cloth to his forehead. Selese spoke slowly, fighting back tears. "Not now. We have a whole life to spend together."

"I do not wish to," he answered, each word an effort. Yet even as he spoke them, he felt his life slipping away; it wasn't much time now.

As he looked into Selese's eyes, he could see the determination in

them.

"I would gladly take death for you," she said.

"Never," Reece replied. "I shall tell the Lord of Death, when I see him, that he can have me, but he shall not have you yet."

Selese reached out with her palms and laid her hands on his wound, and as she did, suddenly, something flushed over Reece. Her hands were icy cold, like death—and yet, strangely, they sent an icy cold energy running into his wound. It ran through his veins, through his entire insides, making him feel colder than he'd ever had, his teeth chattering. He looked up and saw a white icy blue light coming from her hands, in a quick flash, and he felt something like a freezing wind enter his body.

At first it was incredibly painful, wracking his body from head to toe, and he shrieked as it tore through his body. He felt it was the spirit of death, which Selese carried inside her now, entering him.

Then, just as quickly, it ended. Reece lay there, and he looked down and watched in amazement as his wound was entirely healed up.

Reece blinked several times, sweating, in shock.

Then, slowly, unbelievably, he sat up. He checked on his wound, and it was completely healed. Strangest of all, aside from the cold sweat running down his neck, he felt normal—as if he'd never been injured.

Reece looked over at Selese, dumbfounded, and the others did, too.

Selese looked down at her own hands, as if shocked herself by what had happened, and she looked down with humility.

"How did you do that?" Reece asked. "You have saved me."

Reece, feeling newborn, sat up joyously, as the faces lit up of those all around him, and he grabbed Selese. He gave her a big hug and spun her around again and again, and then they kissed. She cried tears of joy as she kissed him back.

"I had no idea you could restore life," he said.

She blushed.

"Neither did I, my lord."

Reece embraced Thorgrin, Elden, O'Connor, and the others, all of them overjoyed to have him back, alive. He looked at Selese, wondering. Had the underworld changed her?

Alistair stepped forward and examined her.

"You carry inside you the mysterious powers of those who have crossed to the land of the dead," Alistair said to her. "And from death there brings forth life."

Alistair turned and gestured to the wounded lying on Erec's ship.

"There are others who need you, too," Alistair said.

Selese looked out at the rows of wounded, unsure.

"I don't know…" she began "…if I can do it again."

Alistair smiled and stepped forward.

"You can," she said.

Selese crossed the deck to Erec's ship, walked alongside the rows of wounded, and stopped before a man with a vicious cut across his shoulder. Selese tentatively reached out and touched his wound; as she did, the blue light once again flashed, and a moment later, his wound was completely healed, no trace of it left.

Selese looked at Alistair in wonder.

"I do not understand this power," she said to Alistair.

Alistair smiled back.

"Sometimes our greatest powers," she replied, "are the ones we can never comprehend."

* * *

As Alistair walked along the deck of the ship, admiring Selese's handiwork, all the healed soldiers, she heard her brother, Thorgrin, call out her name. She turned and her heart lifted to see him approaching. She rushed into his arms and embraced him as he gave her a long hug. She had never imagined she'd see him again.

They had both been through so much, had suffered so much, since they had last seen each other in the Ring, it was almost as if they were different people now. When she departed the Ring for the Southern Isles, she could never have imagined so much would have happened. She could never have imagined that the place she had loved, that had become home, had been completely destroyed—or that the next time she would see her brother would be halfway around the world, in a cave in the midst of an ocean, hiding from the Empire. She felt overwhelmed with waves of remorse, wishing she could have been there for all of them.

She was thrilled to be by Thor's side again, the only person in the world who could understand the upbringing she'd had, her father, the monster Andronicus; who could understand the mother she'd only met in her dreams. It was their joint power, she realized, as siblings, that had allowed them to escape the clutches of the Empire, and being around Thor, she felt stronger, more powerful, than when they were apart. She could sense that he felt it, too.

She could also see the sadness in Thorgrin's eyes, could sense all the suffering he'd been through, and she felt he had changed more than before. All of his suffering, from being apart from his wife, his child, had shaped him. There was a much more serious, older, look in

his eyes. A warrior's look.

"I never thought I would see you again," Thorgrin said.

"Nor I you," she said.

She turned and looked out at the wall of fog guarding them from the Empire.

"You have saved all of us by your work," she said.

"It is as much your work as mine," he replied. "I could not have done that on my own." He looked at her questioningly. "Your powers…do you feel stronger when we are together?"

She had been thinking the same exact thing; it was eerie—it was as if the two of them shared thoughts. She did not like to speak of her powers—but with Thorgrin, it was different.

"I do," she replied. "I feel as if the other half of my power has been restored."

"But how did you come to be here?" he asked. "I thought you to be safely in the Southern Isles."

She shook her head.

"We received word of what happened to the Ring. We set sail at once for the Empire, to help free you, Gwendolyn, and all the others. But why are you not with her?" she asked, puzzled.

She noticed his face fall, saw his sorrow.

"My boy," Thorgrin said, "Guwayne. He is lost."

Alistair's breath caught in her throat at the news. As Thor mentioned his name, she didn't understand what was happening to her: she was suddenly overcome by dark, troubling visions flashing through her mind, visions she could not quite understand.

Thor examined her.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "What is it?"

Alistair shook her head.

"It is nothing," she replied. "I…just feel sorrow at your news."

"Have you seen him?" Thorgrin asked, his voice straining with the hope of a parent. "Have you any idea where he might be?"

Slowly, sadly, she shook her head.

"I wish I could tell you otherwise," she said.

He looked down in disappointment.

"And what of Gwendolyn?" Alistair asked.

Thor shook his head.

"I do not know," he replied. "Last I left her, she sailed for the Empire, to find a safe refuge for our people. I cannot return to her until I find Guwayne."

Thor looked at Alistair, studying her.

"And you?" Thorgrin asked. "Have you seen our mother yet? Have you been to the Land of the Druids?"

Alistair's heart swelled at the thought; it was what she wanted,

more than anything on earth.

"Only in my dreams," she replied. "She visits me every night. One day I shall venture there. But the time is not now. For now, my fate is by Erec's side. He needs me. And we are to marry."

Thor nodded, understanding. She suddenly felt like telling him the news, the news she had not yet shared with anyone, of the child within her.

"There is something else I must tell you…" she began.

Thor's eyes lit up, and she was about to say it—but then, she stopped herself. How could she? She hadn't even told Erec yet. It wouldn't be fair.

Thor looked back patiently, but she shook her head and looked away. She noticed him glance down at her stomach, and somehow she felt he'd read her mind.

"Whatever it is, my sister," he said, "you can tell me when the time is right."

Alistair was relieved that he would allow her her silence and not press her.

"I need your help," Thor said to her, urgency in his voice, and she turned back to him. "I need your vision. Your power. Your sight. I am at a loss. Can you help me find Guwayne?"

Alistair closed her eyes, trying to sense where Guwayne could be—but she saw only darkness once again, and, afraid, she opened them quickly.

"I am sorry," she said. "I do not know. But I shall pray. And I shall dwell on it. Tonight and tomorrow and every day thereafter. I shall pray for the answer to come to you quickly."

Thor nodded back, grateful.

Alistair suddenly felt a strong hand on her shoulder, and she turned to see Erec approach, smiling back at Thor.

"I'm sorry, my love," he said to her, apologetic, "I do not wish to interrupt, but you are needed on the ships."

Alistair hesitated, and Thor nodded to her, understanding.

"Go, my sister," he urged. "We shall see each other again on the morrow."

As Alistair turned and crossed the deck with Erec, holding his hand, she suddenly felt a tingling in her stomach. She placed her hand there, and felt a tremendous vibration—more powerful than any she'd ever felt.

"What is it, my lady?" Erec asked, concerned. "Do you feel ill?"

Alistair quickly lowered her hand and looked away, shaking her head. She debated whether to tell him, and at that moment, with just the two of them alone, more than anything she wanted to. She was never more proud of anything.

Yet for some reason, she did not feel the time was right. Not here, not now. Something was holding her back. There would be a better time, a better place.

“No, my love,” she said, “it is nothing at all.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Godfrey raced with the others through the nighttime streets of Volusia, moving as quickly as he could, clinging to the walls and hiding in the shadows so as not to be seen. He struggled to catch his breath, sweat pouring down his neck. They had not stopped running since they'd escaped from prison, aiming for the gates at the far end of the city, and finally getting close. He was amazed he hadn't collapsed yet, especially after the harrowing night he'd had, and amazed that the others all kept up: he had never known that Akorth and Fulton could move that quickly. Amazing, he thought, what fear could do to you.

They all burst back out onto the cobblestone streets, Merek and Ario out in front, the fastest of the bunch, and Godfrey admired them as they went, in awe at how well they had handled themselves back there. Godfrey had not done so bad himself, he knew, but if it weren't for them both, they would all be dead right now. In some unlikely way, he realized, he had assembled the best team possible for this situation. All, except for Akorth and Fulton. Yet even they, Godfrey knew, had their unique talents, and he knew great things would come of them yet—even if in the most unlikely of times and ways.

As Godfrey ran through the streets, he noticed the piles of corpses, Darius's men, piled high against the walls, like dogs, left to rot in the desert heat. A fresh wave of anger and remorse washed over him. He could not help but feel responsible for all of their lives; after all, it was he who had led them inside these walls, all because he had naïvely trusted in the Finians. He vowed to never be naïve again.

Gasping, Godfrey bumped into Merek and Ario as they came to sudden stop behind a corner. He looked out, and his heart leapt to see, before them, the city gates, unguarded at this late-night hour. This was their chance.

They all prepared to move, when Godfrey was suddenly overcome by a thought, and he held out his palm and stopped them.

Merek and Ario, breathing hard, turned and looked to him as if he were crazy.

"Now is our chance!" Merek cried out. "Are you mad?"

"What are you doing?" hissed Ario. "We are but feet away from freedom!"

Godfrey could not help himself. He knew this was their chance and he knew he should flee with the others. That would be the rational, the disciplined thing to do.

But Godfrey had never been disciplined—and had never been rational. He had led a life ruled by his passions—and now was not

about to be an exception.

Godfrey turned and surveyed the quiet city of Volusia, and felt a fresh desire for vengeance. In the distance, towering over the city buildings, he saw the golden palace of the Finians. He looked out and saw all the dead corpses of his friends, and it did not feel just to him that these Finians should get away with it. A wrong had been done that had to be set right.

Godfrey knew this was one of those moments of his life. He could do as he always did—take the easy way out—or he could do the honorable thing: take vengeance for the deaths of his friends. For those who had depended on him. Godfrey knew that would be the hard route, the route most likely to get him killed.

But for the first time in Godfrey's life, he no longer cared. For the first time he could remember, he understood how his father felt, and his father before him—there was more to life than safety. There was honor. And honor came with a price.

"I don't know about you," Godfrey said to the others, examining the golden palace, "but it doesn't sit right with me. Those Finians are sleeping peacefully through the night. Our brothers and sisters are dead."

They all turned, still catching their breath, sweating, and followed Godfrey's gaze to the golden palace, and he could see the same look slowly overcoming them.

"So what are you saying?" Akorth asked. "That we turn back around?"

Godfrey smiled.

"We've done stupider things," he said. "It seems awfully quiet here. I say we shake things up a bit."

Merek smiled wide, hands on his hips.

"You know, Godfrey," he said, "I think I'm starting to like you."

Godfrey smiled back.

"Is that a yes?" he asked.

Merek smiled wider, turned and took his first step back toward the city.

"I'll take vengeance over freedom any day."

* * *

Godfrey raced with the others through the huge, open-air golden archway leading to the Finians' palace, entering the palace without a hitch. At first Godfrey was surprised that there were no guards posted outside it—but then he realized that it made sense. They had no one to fear. The Finians ran the city, and no one in this city would be

foolish enough to dare attack them. It was fear of them that kept everyone away. The highest form of power, Godfrey knew, was when you did not need any guards at all.

Godfrey ran right through the archway and into the palace, his bare feet cool on the marble floors, and as they all headed deeper into the massive parlor, he began to wonder which way to go. He spotted a massive golden statue and fountain, and behind it, a golden staircase, twisting up to the upper levels. Godfrey knew at once that that was where they had to go; he figured the Finians would be sleeping on the upper levels.

He ran with the others into the staircase, his bare feet cushioned on the red carpet, and they took the stairs three at a time, twisting up, higher and higher, past landing after landing, until finally they arrived at a floor lined with gold, the walls lined with gold. Godfrey, sprinting, was surprised to find a guard up here, dozing off, his back to them, clearly not expecting anyone to attack.

They all stopped, caught off guard, as the guard turned, alerted to their presence. Before he could cry out, Merek stepped forward and quickly cut his throat with his dagger, and Ario ran up behind the guard and covered his mouth so that he would not make a sound. They worked well together: the guard dropped down to his feet, silently, dead.

They all continued running down the hall, until they came to the first large doorway, made of gold. Godfrey led the way as the group burst in, ready to kill whatever Finian they found.

But as they entered the dim chamber, lit only by torches, Godfrey stopped short, shocked by what he saw.

It was a treasury. The room was filled with jewels and treasures of every kind imaginable. Godfrey stopped and started in. Godfrey was used to seeing gold in his father's court—but he had never seen anything like this. The amount of wealth here, nearly piled to the ceiling, was staggering. Even one of the necklaces he saw before him, draped with diamonds and rubies, could bankroll an army.

Merek, Ario, Akorth, and Fulton rushed in and began to gather them, filling their hands and pockets with precious trinkets, until finally Godfrey ran over and stopped them.

"Our time is short here," he said. "Would you rather have jewels or would you rather have vengeance?"

They all stopped, understanding, carried away by their greed, and turned and followed him, letting the rest of it go.

Godfrey, followed by the others, turned and ran down the hall until he came to another arched, golden door, smaller than the last. This time he tried the handle and it was locked.

He put his shoulder into it, and Merek and Ario joined him, but it

would not give.

Akorth and Fulton rushed forward and joined them, throwing their shoulders and their weight into it.

They all rammed it together, and on the third try, it smashed open, breaking into bits.

"Finally," Akorth said, "I'm good for something."

Godfrey was the first person in and as he entered, he saw the Finian leader, Fitus, the man who had betrayed him, sit up in a luxurious bed of silk sheets. He looked like a startled child, with his pale face and big shock of red hair, face covered in freckles.

"How are you alive?" Fitus called out, in shock, reaching out for a gold-hilted dagger beside his bed.

Godfrey leapt forward, landed on his arm, and pinned it down, while at the same time Akorth and Fulton leapt on him, holding him down, too. Ario pried the blade from the man's hand, while Merek punched him in his solar plexus.

Ario held the dagger to Fitus's throat.

"You killed our friends," Godfrey said.

Fitus, terror in his eyes, began to quiver.

"I did what I had to do," he said. "Your friends were slaves—they were worthless anyway."

Ario looked at Godfrey, who nodded back his approval, and in one quick motion he sliced the man's throat.

"None of us are worthless," Ario said.

Fitus gasped, eyes bulging wide, then finally he lay still, dead, his blood staining the sheets—and Godfrey took the dagger and plunged it into his heart.

"That was for Darius," Godfrey said.

Godfrey heard the distant shout of a guard, and he turned to the others.

"Let's go!" he said. "Now!"

As one, they all burst out of the room and ran back down the hall, almost reaching the staircase when Merek stopped and yelled: "Wait!"

He stood there and looked back down the hall, toward the room with the jewels.

"We're going to need to buy our way out of here," he said.

They all had that look in their eyes, a look of greed, and none of them could resist. Vengeance was done—now it was time for loot. Godfrey, too, could not resist.

They all turned back and each of them stuffed their shirts and pockets with as many jewels as they could carry. Godfrey got a sapphire and ruby bracelet, a golden pen, a sack of gold coins, and a handful of diamond necklaces. He grabbed more and more, feeling more and more weighted down, and realizing that this would be

enough wealth to bankroll his own army. To take vengeance. To do anything he wanted.

When they all had their fill, they turned around and prepared to go—only to find that their exit was blocked.

A dozen Finian soldiers stood at the door, and before them there stood a single Finian woman, with bright red hair and piercing white eyes, calmly watching them all. She stared at them, an amused smile on her face. Godfrey wondered how long she'd been there.

"Going somewhere?" she asked.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Darius walked into the arena and was met by the thunderous applause of the Empire citizens, insatiable to watch more death. He walked awkwardly, chained to his three brothers Desmond, Raj, and Luzi—and several other gladiators—and he felt the absence of Kaz. The arena thundered louder, if possible, than the day before, and Darius, though drained from the battles, remained as awestruck as he was the first he saw it. The light was so bright here, bouncing off the bright dirt floor, and as waves of heat hit him, this place reeked with the body odor of thousands of Empire citizens sweltering beneath the suns. Marching in here was like entering a home of death.

Darius, aching from his bruises, covered in scrapes and cuts, stretched his hands, opening and closing his fists on the swords they had given them, and wondered how he would be able to fight on this day. The short swords were dull, not sharp enough to sever his shackles. They had been given swords at least, not clubs, and that boded well—or then again, perhaps it did not.

Darius had been told that the second day of matches was more intense than the first, and he did not know how that was possible; the day before, it had taken him all his skills just to survive. He had a sinking feeling that their chances of surviving on this day were bleak indeed. Still, Darius did not fear death. What he feared was dying ignobly.

Darius felt a tug at his ankles and he stumbled to the side, losing his balance. He looked down and cursed his shackles, the fear of the other boys yanking on them, all of them swaying back and forth, left to right, as they marched deeper inside. Nearby he spotted Drok, glaring back at him through his narrows eyes, his face wearing as mean an expression as ever. His eyes were cold and hard, and Darius saw in them an intense desire to kill him. He wondered if he had made a mistake in showing him mercy and keeping him alive.

“What do you think they’ll have in store for us today?” Luzi asked, standing beside him, switching the sword between hands nervously as he scanned the arena walls.

“It can’t be worse than yesterday,” Desmond said, chained behind him.

“Oh, yes it can,” Raj said, standing beside him.

Darius was having these very same thoughts himself. He turned and surveyed the arena walls, battered from years of fighting, and as he did, a horn sounded and the main door opened. Out came Morg, and the crowd roared like crazy as he stepped forward and raised his palms, soaking in their applause like a cheap circus performer.

Finally, he reached the center of the arena, and, turning in all directions, savoring the attention, lowered his hands. The crowd quieted.

"Citizens of the Empire!" he boomed. "I present to you today the survivors of the yesterday's match! These brave boys who have proved their worth—and who now must prove it again!"

Another roar arose from the crowd, as Morg waited for them to settle down.

"Today, there shall be only three survivors—or none at all. No more than three boys shall be allowed to live. Whether they are killed by us, or by each other, we don't care!"

The crowd cheered, and with that, Morg turned and ceremoniously strutted out of the arena, the great iron doors slamming behind him as he did.

Suddenly there came the sound of trumpets, and the crowd went wild.

Darius, on edge, prepared for anything, could feel his heart slamming in his chest.

"Whatever they throw at us," he urged his friends, "stick together."

Iron cells opened, this time, from all sides of the arena, and charging from them were two dozen Empire warriors, dressed in an all-black armor from head to toe, wearing menacing helmets and carrying huge shields. As Darius examined the shields, he could see them spinning, and could see their edges were lined with small spikes. They outnumbered Darius and the others two to one, and they charged from every direction, enclosing them in a circle.

Outnumbered, chained together and armed only with these short swords, Darius knew their odds were bleak indeed.

"CLOSE TOGETHER!" Darius shouted.

This time, the other boys listened to Darius, and Darius felt his chains slacken, giving him more room to maneuver, as the boys crowded closer together—all save Drok, who stuck to himself, alone at the end of the chain.

"We must choose one man and strike as one!" Darius yelled out. "Twelve of us cannot kill twenty-four of them—but twelve of us can kill one of them! And all we need do is kill one at a time! Back to back!"

They all backed up until their backs were touching in a tight circle, Darius's back touching the sweaty muscular back of another boy.

Darius stood there, as the soldiers neared, charging them, raising great clouds of dust, and he waited. He knew that discipline was the key: if they all stayed disciplined, then they would have a chance.

The crowd cheered in anticipation as the soldiers got closer and closer. Darius looked down and judged the length of the chain, and he waited, and waited. He could feel the chains tugging at his feet, and as the other boys got nervous, he prayed that they obeyed his commands.

"WAIT FOR IT!" Darius yelled.

The soldiers came closer, fifty feet away, then forty, then thirty….

"WAIT!"

Suddenly, one of the boys got scared and darted from the group; Darius felt his chains begin to yank, but then saw Desmond step forward and stomp on the boy's chain, preventing him from fleeing.

An Empire soldier, but ten feet away, threw his shield, and it spun, spikes rotating, and a moment later it severed the errant boy's head.

The crowd cheered, and Darius feared the other boys would try to run, too; but to his surprise, they stayed put, waiting, as he'd commanded.

Darius waited until the soldiers came even closer, his heart slamming in his chest.

"NOW!" Darius yelled.

All the boys suddenly ran together as one, lowering their shoulders, following Darius and moving as one unit. They all took aim and pounced on one soldier, the closest one, before Darius, all stabbing and slashing him, piercing his armor until he slumped to the ground, dead.

"Luzi, grab his shield," Darius commanded. "Raj—his sword! Cut us free!"

Raj dove to the dirt and grabbed the heavy sword, made of strong steel, and wheeled and severed the chain, freeing them from the boy whose head was decapitated. There was no time, though, for him to sever any more chains, as the rest of the soldiers were upon them.

Luzi handed Darius the shield, and Darius immediately threw it, its blades spinning, and it whizzed through the air and cut off the arm of a soldier, just as he raised it to throw an ax their way. The soldier dropped to his knees, and the crowd cheered.

The soldiers, though, came upon them fast—too fast. Darius swung his sword at the soldier bearing down on him, but his spinning shield was like lightning, and its blades caught Darius's sword and yanked it from his grip, sending it flying and leaving him weaponless. The knight then swung back and smashed Darius in the face with his shield, sending him stumbling backwards and landing on the ground.

Darius grabbed his sword, lying on the ground beside him, and rolled out of the way just as the spiked end of a shield came down for his face. The spikes lodged the shield in the dirt, and as the soldier tried to free it, Darius took advantage, swinging around and chopping

off the soldier's head.

The crowd roared.

Beside him Raj ducked, as a soldier swung a flail for his head. Raj lunged forward and stabbed his sword through the soldier's foot, pinning him to the ground. He was left exposed by the move, though, and another soldier rushed forward to stab him in the ribs. Darius, yanked back on his shackles, could not get there in time.

Darius watched as Luzi rushed forward, jumping in the way of the blow to save Raj—and as he did, to Darius's shock, he was stabbed through the heart.

Luzi groaned and collapsed onto the ground, dead, and the crowd cheered.

Darius was so stunned he could barely breathe. But there was no time to reflect. The soldiers kept coming, and he had to keep fighting, or else share the same fate.

Darius reached over and grabbed the shield and wrested it from the exposed soldier's hand, then spun it and swung it around, severing the soldier's stomach. He then swung around behind him and embedded the spikes into the side of another soldier's face, killing him.

The crowd roared as the two soldiers fell.

Darius had a clean blow on a soldier, and he lunged forward, about to kill another one—when suddenly his chains yanked him backwards. Annoyed, he looked back to see two of the other boys rushing in the opposite direction. Two soldiers came up and took advantage of the mayhem, the lack of organization, and used the edge of their shields to kill them on the spot.

The rest of the soldiers closed in, and the fighting became gruesome and bloody and hand-to-hand; shouts rose up, as Darius watched the number of boys dwindle. Soon there remained but seven of them standing—and a handful of soldiers.

Darius led the way, and the boys stripped the dead soldiers of their superior arms and shields, and used them against them. This time they listened to Darius, and huddled together and fought as one, moving in the same direction. One at a time, they began to fell soldiers.

Darius was just starting to feel optimistic, when suddenly he heard a shriek rise up, and turned to see Drok raise his sword and drive it through the back of one of the other boys. Drok then wheeled and cut off the head of another boy. As Darius watched, he grabbed Desmond from behind, put the sword at his throat, and pulled him back. Darius knew that in moments he would be dead—no one had expected an attack from within.

Darius wasted no time: he turned from the Empire soldiers, raced

across the field, praying that his chains would give him enough slack, and leapt for Drok's back. He was just a foot away from grabbing him, when suddenly his chains were yanked back by one of the other boys fighting a soldier. Just out of reach, Darius went flying back.

It was too late: Darius watched, horrified, as Desmond's throat was cut from behind by Drok. Drok smiled back, looking right at Darius as he did it, victorious.

Darius felt as if his own throat had been cut; at that moment, he blamed himself, and he hated himself for keeping Drok alive, and for letting his friend die. Desmond, his closest friend, dead.

"NO!" Darius shrieked.

Darius, still out of reach, still confined by his chains, could not reach the boy—instead, he turned and vented his anger on the Empire soldiers. He charged and went blow for blow, sword to sword, fighting like a man possessed, finding his openings, dodging their deadly shields, and felling the final three soldiers.

The crowd roared.

Darius, breathing hard, looked about and saw but four other boys remained: Raj, Drok, and two other boys, fierce fighters he didn't know. He wondered if the match was over, as there came a lull in the fighting. Morg had announced that this day's match was over if they killed them all or if only three of them remained. But there remained five. Did that mean the match was over? Were more soldiers coming for them?

More than anything, Darius wanted to kill Drok. He took one of the dead soldiers' sword and severed the chain, freeing himself so he could lunge for Drok. Now, he was chained only to Raj. Darius was about to lunge for him, when suddenly, horns sounded.

There came a roar, louder than before, and as a new hidden door was opened in the side of the arena, there came charging toward them something that made Darius's heart stop: three immense Razifs, ferocious animals with flaming red hides, horns and long claws, came barreling right for them. They lowered their horns and charged with fury, egged on by the crowd.

Darius did not know how they could possibly survive this newest challenge. He felt overcome with fear, but forced himself to control it, to rise above it.

And suddenly, he had an idea.

"Stay close!" Darius said to Raj. "Wait for my word! Then run the other way and hold out your chain!"

Darius knew Raj trusted him, and they both held their ground, waiting until the last moment, letting the Razif that led the pack get closer.

Finally, at the last moment, Darius yelled: "NOW!"

Darius and Raj ran in opposite ways, and as they did, their chain tightened, and Darius held on for dear life.

The Razif ran right into it, and the impact sent Darius flying backwards. But Raj held on, too, and the chain wrapped around its legs, and the Razif stumbled and went flying face first into the dirt.

The crowd cheered.

Darius and Raj, thinking the same thing, each jumped onto the Razif's back and wrapped their chains around its neck. They held on, choking it as it bucked wildly, until finally it stopped moving.

They had barely finished killing it when another Razif was charging down for them; this time, there was no time to react.

Darius and Raj rolled out of the way, but the Razif lowered its horn and entangled it on their chain, and they both found themselves flying through the air, each on one side of the Razif, dangling roughly as it galloped through the arena, the crowd cheering. The Razif finally became enraged and spun its head and threw them.

Darius went tumbling, head over heel, chained to Raj, each tumble feeling as if it were breaking his ribs.

Finally, they gained their feet, just as the Razif circled and charged for them again.

"Get closer!" Darius yelled to Raj.

They stood side by side, then at the last second, they each jumped together, out of the way.

The Razif tore past them, as the crowd oohed from the close call.

"FOLLOW!" Darius yelled.

Darius broke off into a sprint after it, and Raj followed as Darius caught up to it, as it slowed and prepared to circle, and leapt up onto its back. Raj quickly leapt onto it, too.

The crowd cheered as the Razif bucked wildly, trying to get them off.

But Darius would not let go, and finally, he commandeered it and as he grabbed its neck and dugs his bare heels into its leather-like skin, he forced it to obey his will. He directed it toward the other Razif, which was charging for the remaining three boys.

Darius's Razif lowered its horn as it bore down on the other Razif, and it gored it in its midsection. The crowd went wild as it drove it down to the ground, killing it right before it could kill the other boys.

The impact sent Darius and Raj flying off it, falling to the ground, and as Darius rolled to his feet, he was suddenly met by Drok, who kicked him in the face. Darius fell on his back, and Drok landed on top, choking him, trying to kill them.

Darius kneed him between the legs, and as Drok loosened his grasp, Darius swung around and elbowed him across the face, knocking him off.

Darius watched as one of the other boys charged for Drok, sword raised, wanting to give him what he deserved as he lowered his sword for his back. But Drok, sensing it, turned at the last second and blocked the sword with his chain. The boy was shocked as Drok wrested the sword from his hands, then used it to kill him.

The crowd cheered. That left four of them.

The Razif, still alive, turned and bore down on them, and Darius could not react in time. He saw its horn looming, about to kill him.

As he braced himself for death, Raj lunged forward and pushed Darius out of the way. He saved Darius, but found himself in the beast's path, and its horn cut through his flesh, giving him an awful wound along his side, as he shrieked out in pain, covered in blood.

Darius, horrified, turned and pounced on the back of the animal. It bucked wildly, as Darius raised his sword, and he could not get it to steady. It set its sights on the fourth boy, and as he ran gored it through the back.

The crowd cheered wildly.

Darius finally got a hold of his sword, and brought it down with both hands, decapitating the Razif.

It dropped to its knees, blood pouring out, dead, and Darius dropped to the ground beside it.

Darius knelt there as the crowd was whipped into a frenzy and horns sounded. The Razifs were all dead. Only three of them remained.

The match was over.

Darius knelt there, feeling a sweet sense of victory, mixed with remorse. He had survived. Raj had survived.

But at what price?

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The Lords of the Seven stood close together in a circle in the dim stone chamber, lit only by the sole shaft of light pouring down through the oculus in the ceiling, and faced each other silently, donning their all-black robes and black hoods. Immortals, beings who had led the Empire through century after century, who had been there all the way back at the Great Forming, these seven men stood in the shadows, on the periphery of the sunlight, silently staring into it, as they had for millennia.

For millennia, they had stood there and stared into the light, seeing visions, watching the past, forming the future as it swirled through the dust in the light, deciding on a course for the Empire. These beings represented the four horns and two spikes of the Empire, and the seventh was the deciding vote. They were the One Who Ruled All, the ones whom even the Supreme Commanders had to defer to. They were the ones whose will was absolute, and whom had never been defied. Ever.

Now, for the first time, as they stared into the shaft of sunlight, the circular black granite table beneath it was not empty—but instead, held the severed head of their messenger. They had sent him to Volusia, and she had returned him lifeless.

They all stared at it solemnly, silently concurring on a plan of action.

It was the seventh Lord who stepped forward, as he often did, to speak on their behalf. He reached out, grabbed the hair matted with blood, picked it up, and looked into its eyes. They were still open, and stared back at him with a look of agony in death.

“This Volusia,” he began, his voice dark, gravelly, “this young girl who thinks she’s a Goddess—she thinks she can defy us. She has come to believe she can win.”

“We shall dispatch our forces from all corners of the Empire,” interjected another, “and crush the capital. Within a fortnight, she shall be deposed.”

The seventh Lord raised the head higher and stared into its eyes, as though searching for an answer. The silence hung heavy in the air.

“No,” he finally replied.

All the others turned to him.

“Don’t you see?” he said. “That is exactly what she wants. She has weaved a trap. She has some power at her disposal, a dark power, one I cannot discern. One I don’t quite trust. We shall not fall into it.”

“Then shall we just let her run free, run the capital with disdain?” asked another, outraged.

The seventh waited a long time, then finally stepped into the sunlight, revealing a too-pale face, startling blue eyes, a visage marked by centuries of evil and deception. He looked out at the others and grinned an evil grin.

“We shall give her what she does not expect,” he added. “We shall make her suffer where it hurts her most.”

He breathed deep.

“Volusia,” he said.

The others all stared back, and he could feel them thinking.

“We shall send our armies not to the capital, but to her home city. It is defenseless now, left unguarded. She shall never expect it. We shall destroy everything she’s ever known and loved. All of her people. Every last one. It shall lure her out, irrationally, to war. And then we shall meet her, then we shall make her know the power of the Seven.”

There came a long silence, and finally the other six Lords stepped into the circle, each raising their fists.

They touched fists to the table, the sacred symbol, and it was decreed.

Soon, Volusia would be a memory.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

As the second sun fell, Gwendolyn entered the royal feasting hall in the magnificent castle of the Ridge, passing through great silver doors, held open for her by several attendants, and was overwhelmed at the sight before her. Joined by Kendrick, Sandara, Steffen, Arliss, Stara, Aberthol, Brandt, Atme, Illepra, and a half dozen Silver, with Krohn at her heels—all that remained of the Ring, all who had survived the great trek—Gwendolyn entered the hall and looked up, in awe at the soaring, tapered ceilings, the walls in here lined with weapons, war trophies, suits of armor, banners, and the mounted, stuffed heads of game. Beneath her feet was a well-worn cobblestone, its floor spread out with hand-woven rugs, on which lay lazy and well-fed dogs. Music hung in the air, and as Gwen looked out, she saw bands of musicians, playing harps, interspersed amidst the feasting tables. The feasting tables were all made of silver, save for the King's which was made of gold, large and round, right in the center of the room. Everything shone, and it was like walking into a dream.

Equally impressive were the people, this hall packed with hundreds of the royal court, dressed in the finest garb, draped with the finest jewels Gwen had ever seen. The men wore the purple mantle of the royal family, warriors each, all with the characteristic shaved heads and long blond, stiff beards of this people. Some of the beards, Gwen noticed, were braided, indicating perhaps a certain rank, while others were long and stiff. Logs roared in the enormous marble fireplace, and several dogs lounged before them, contentedly chewing away on bones. It was a room bursting with splendor and abundance, with joy and prosperity, with music, liveliness—and most of all food. The delicious smell of all the roasting meats and sauces made Gwen's knees weak. She couldn't remember the last time she had a decent meal.

Gwen felt the hunger pains in her stomach, and she knew she was ready for her first big meal—as all of her people were; indeed, as she looked over, she saw her people looking out, transfixed by the heaps of meats and cheeses and luxuries of every sort on every table, and practically drooling at the bounty before them.

"My lady."

Gwendolyn turned to see an attendant approach in deference.

"If you would allow me to lead you to the King's table. He has reserved a spot for you and your men."

Gwendolyn nodded and followed him across the chamber, touched that the King would reserve spots for her. She knew it was a great honor.

As they passed through the crowd, she could feel the eyes of hundreds of people on her, all nodding back affably, smiling, and all examining them as if they were objects of curiosity. Gwen suddenly felt self-conscious about her clothes, fearing for a moment that she was still wearing the same garb she'd had to cross the desert. Then she looked down and remembered that she wore a luxurious outfit of black silks that the King's attendants had graciously left for her in her chamber.

As she neared the King's table, Gwen looked out and saw the King seated at the head, and beside him, his wife, the Queen, seated perfectly erect and wearing a gracious smile, with her long blond hair and green eyes, the very picture of beauty and royalty. She wore the most beautiful necklace Gwen had ever seen, comprised of rubies, sapphires, and diamonds, and on her head she wore a diamond-encrusted crown. She looked to be the King's age, perhaps in her forties.

She stood and faced Gwendolyn.

"My Queen," she said to Gwendolyn, taking her hand and kissing it as she was introduced.

"My Queen," Gwendolyn responded, smiling. Then she shook her head. "You are Queen here, my lady," Gwendolyn added, "not I. It is I who should be addressing you."

The Queen smiled back.

"Once a queen, you are always a Queen," she replied graciously. "Everything you have has been stripped away from you. I shall make sure that the honor and title of your rank is shall not be stripped away too. All of our men have been instructed to address you by your rank —I have seen to that."

Gwen flushed, surprised, overcome by this woman's kindness, and she felt a rush of love for her. Even Gwendolyn's own mother had never been so kind to her, and Gwen could not help herself—she stepped forward and embraced her.

The Queen at first seemed caught off guard, especially as a surprised gasp spread through the room; but then she embraced Gwen back, warmly.

The King reached out clasped both of Gwendolyn's hands warmly, then kissed both her cheeks, as was, Gwen assumed, their custom, as he led her to her seat at the table, opposite the King. Kendrick was seated to one side of her, Steffen on the other, and the others all around the table, joining not only the King and Queen, but several others, all appearing to be members of his family. Gwendolyn found herself seated in the most luxurious soft-cushioned chair.

Gwen felt relieved that all of her people were here—all except Argon, who was in the hands of the King's healers, and the baby,

whom Illepra had given to the nurses for feeding. The Silver sat at their own table close by, joining warriors who appeared to be the King's elite, who all welcomed them warmly. Clearly, they were eager to share battle stories.

"We can always speak," the King boomed, as all eyes turned to him, "but first, you must eat. After all you've been through, let food come first. Talk can come later."

The King nodded, and a moment later, trays of foods and delicacies were placed before her by a flock of attendants. Gwen saw the King and the others eating, and she could no longer restrain herself. She reached down and popped the first delicacy into her mouth, a fig covered with shredded coconut. She chewed, and as she did, she felt her entire body restored.

Unable to resist, she ate several more before she finally held himself in check.

Gwen heard a whining, and she kicked herself for forgetting Krohn; he sat at her feet, patiently, and she reached down and gave him one. He swallowed it whole, licked his lips, and she gave him another. Then another.

Gwendolyn ate and ate, as did the others, eating thinly sliced steaks covered in delicious sauces, along with several fruits and vegetables she had never seen before. She gave Krohn one bite for every one she took. Course after course arrived, more than she'd ever seen, even at a wedding feast, and Gwen was impressed by the endless bounties of this place. The table, always, was filled with laughter, these people relaxed, carefree, and quick to laugh.

When she could eat no more, Gwen looked up and was relieved to see all of her people around the table equally content. Even Krohn, beside her, was finally content, curled at her feet, sleeping. Finally, she could lean back and relax, for the first time in she did not know how long. She looked all around the chamber, at the craftsmanship of this castle, and she was overwhelmed by the beauty of this place, by its order and sophistication. In some ways, it was like being back in King's Court—yet grander.

Gwen sat back, stuffed, and felt her energy slowly being restored within her. She looked up to the King and Queen and felt overwhelmed with gratitude. If it weren't for them, she and all her people would be starving to death in the desert right now.

"I cannot thank you enough," Gwendolyn said sincerely. "You have brought us back to life. May the Gods repay your kindness. I, one day, somehow, shall find a way to repay you."

The King smiled.

"You already have," he said, in his deep, booming voice, and the others quieted as he spoke. "You grace us with your presence and

allow us to practice the sacred law of hospitality. Not to mention, you are our distant bloodline, after all. We share the same ancestors, descend from the same line of kings and queens. There was a time when they all dined together, here in the Ridge. Now that time for our people has come again. For after all, even if separated by a great sea, we are one people."

Gwendolyn had never thought of it that way, but she knew it to be true as she examined their faces; she saw a resemblance in their bone structure, a look to them that could have fit in perfectly with her kin, her people. She could see something of herself in them, too, and she found it remarkable to consider how she could look similar to someone so far away, on the other side of the world. It was as if one big, great family had been split in two all these years.

Now that she had eaten and could think clearly, Gwendolyn slowly took in her environment; she looked around the table, noticed all the others seated beside the King, and she was curious.

The King must have noticed her curiosity, because he cleared his throat and spoke.

"Allow me to introduce you to my family," the King said. "Seated here with me are six of my children—four boys and two girls—all, the pride of my life. Here to my right is my eldest son, Koldo, a fine warrior and the leader of my Legions. He will be the one to inherit my kingdom."

Gwendolyn looked over and was surprised to see a tall, broad-shouldered, muscular man, his skin dark black, perhaps in his late twenties. He smiled graciously, revealed perfect, bright white teeth, and like the others, he had a bald head, a scar running across it, and a short beard. He had the poise of a warrior, and of a King's firstborn son.

"My Queen," he said, his voice deep and strong, "a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Gwendolyn smiled and nodded back.

"The pleasure is all mine," she replied.

Gwen was curious as to how the King's firstborn and heir could be of a different race—but she knew that now was not the time to ask.

"Seated beside him," the King continued, "are my second-eldest sons, my twins, Ludvig and Mardig."

Two men, perhaps in their early twenties, looked back at her, and Gwen was at first surprised they were twins. They were of the same height and general build, but otherwise, they did not resemble each other. One, Ludvig, was more muscular, sat erect, and had the aura of a warrior, and the bald head and a braided blond beard of their people. He had a rugged look, with a large jaw and a plain, honest face. The other, Mardig, looked similar, but was thinner, more slight,

had no beard, and had a full head of dark hair. His features were more refined, and unlike his brother, he had a pretty-boy like face, and he stared back at her with dark eyes, in contrast to his brother's blue eyes, and Gwen detected some darkness in them. She wondered why he, alone of all the others, did not shave his head, and she made a mental note to ask later.

Beside him, clinging to him possessively and glaring back at Gwendolyn, sat a woman about his age, with long black hair and eyes, whom Gwen took, from her wedding ring, to be his wife.

Ludvig nodded back at her respectfully.

"My Queen," he said, his voice strong and respectful.

The other one, Mardig, did not nod back at all.

"You are not my Queen," Mardig said, "so I shall not address you that way. But welcome, stranger."

"Mardig!" the Queen of the Ridge yelled at him, her face darkening. She turned to Gwen, blushing, apologetic. "Forgive me, my lady," she said. "It seems not all of my boys have grown up as they should."

Gwen wondered what was going on, but thought it best to stay out of it.

"Do not worry, my Queen," she said. "I am comfortable to be addressed however anyone here wishes."

The tension dissipated, and yet inwardly, Gwen made a mental note to be careful of Mardig. She did not like what she sensed.

The King cleared his throat.

"Seated to my other side here you'll find my eldest daughter, Ruth. She is as fine a warrior as any of the others. Don't be fooled by her sex or appearance."

Gwen looked over and saw a girl of perhaps eighteen, tall, with broad shoulders, looking back at her with strength in her eyes, the eyes of a warrior, a look she could recognize anywhere. Gwen was surprised to see that she, too, wore a shaved head, and wore light chainmail armor. While she was very pretty, her features were somewhat masculine, and if Gwen had not been told she was a girl, she might not have guessed.

"Pleased to meet you, my Queen," she said, her voice deep and confident and strong, the voice of a warrior.

Gwen sensed the sincerity in her, a warrior's spirit, and she liked her instantly.

"The honor is mine," Gwen responded, impressed.

"Beside her," the King continued, "my youngest daughter, Jasmine. Do not let her age fool you; she is wiser than us all. Her scholarship outpaces even my Chief Scholar, so much so that in this year, only her tenth, she has been named the official scholar of the

King."

Gwendolyn looked at the girl in surprise, and saw a beautiful young girl with almond-shaped green eyes and strawberry-blonde hair staring back at her, her eyes shining with intelligence. Gwen could sense that there was something special about her.

"My Queen," she said, a slight smile in her eyes, "the history of the MacGil Queens is an interesting one. I should like to share it with you sometime."

Gwen nodded back, and could not help but smile; the girl spoke as if she were as old as Aberthol.

"I would be delighted," Gwendolyn replied. She could see Aberthol bristle beside her, and was amused that he felt jealous.

"And beside her," the King concluded, "you'll find my youngest son, Kaden, nearing his fourteenth year, a very special age for the warriors-to-be in our kingdom. He shall embark on his warrior quest soon and enter into manhood."

"I shall follow in my brother's footsteps," he said back, proudly, to Gwen. He still had a full head of hair, brownish, and it made Gwen wonder if the boys here shaved their heads when they became men.

Gwen smiled, hearing the courage and determination in his voice.

"I am sure you will, young warrior," she replied.

"Those are my children—" the King began, but his Queen cut him off, laying a hand on his wrist.

"We have other children, too," she said, mysteriously. "Though they cannot join us tonight."

Gwen, confused, was intrigued to know more, but she merely nodded courteously, not wanting to pry.

The King looked down briefly, and Gwen could see the disappointment in his face. It made her wonder about these other children, and what they could have done to disappoint their father so much.

"It is great honor to meet you all," Gwen replied. "Thank you for welcoming us to your family's table."

"We are one bloodline after all," the Queen said, "and we want you all to feel at home here."

Attendants arrived bearing sacks of wine, filling golden goblets, and as Gwen drank, it went right to her head. They then brought trays upon trays heaped with sweets, chocolates and delicacies of every sort, and as Gwen ate them, unable to resist, they were the most delicious desserts she'd ever had.

"So tell us, my Queen," the King boomed out, as the table settled down and began to quiet, "how did it come to be that a royal entourage from halfway around the world should end up here? Why did you leave your home?"

Gwendolyn felt all eyes turn to her as their table—and neighboring tables—grew quiet.

"We did not leave, my King," she said. "We were forced into exile, by the Empire. They destroyed everything we've ever known and loved."

Gwen could see the surprise in their faces, and could feel the chamber grow quiet.

The King looked back, puzzled

"Our ancient books tell of your Ring being protected by a Canyon," the King said, "and over that canyon, a magical shield. This shield is rumored to keep the Ring impregnable to all attack."

Gwen nodded.

"That shield did, once, exist," she replied. "But not anymore. It was destroyed. By an even more powerful magic. It was the culmination of a series of events put into motion by the assassination of my father, the King MacGil."

The room gasped.

"Your King, assassinated?" the King asked, mortified.

Gwen nodded.

"By whom?"

Gwen braced herself as she replied, embarrassed to say:

"My brother," she said flatly.

The room gasped louder, as the King and his family looked at her, horrified.

"He has paid for his crimes," Gwen replied. "He has been executed. But that doesn't help us now."

The King, brow furrowed, seemed to ponder this as there followed a long silence.

"And your people?" he finally asked. "What became of them?"

Gwen felt her eyes well with tears, and she looked down and shook her head sadly.

"All dead, my liege," she finally replied, "all except those you see before you now. And a few others," she added, thinking of Thorgrin, Reece, and Erec.

"But how could they destroy such a great land," the Queen asked, "and all its people with it?"

"They came with dragons, led first by Andronicus, then by Romulus. They turned all they saw to rubble and ruin."

Gwen breathed deep.

"My husband," she added, then corrected herself, "my husband-to-be, he defended us. Romulus's dragons were killed in the process, and no dragons survived."

"And where is your husband-to-be now?" the Queen asked, her voice filled with compassion.

Gwendolyn looked down and sadly shook her head. She wanted to answer, but choked up with tears.

"Somewhere on the high seas," she replied, "searching for our child."

The Queen gasped, and Gwen could no longer help herself; she broke out crying, then quickly wiped the tears on the back of her hand.

"I'm sorry, my King," she said. "I will never rest easy until I know Thorgrin and Guwayne are safe."

"There are ways to find them," the King replied.

Gwen looked up at him with hope.

"How?" she asked, desperate.

"I have a seer," he replied. "Perhaps he can find your Thorgrin."

Gwen's heart leapt with joy, yet she was afraid to feel optimistic.

"I would give anything, my liege," she replied.

He nodded.

"Consider it done," he replied. "At daybreak, I shall instruct him."

"You are all welcome to live with us for however long you wish," the Queen said. "Whether it is a day, or a lifetime. We welcome you to join our people. There can be many great roles for you and your people here. You need us, and we need you."

Gwendolyn nodded back, so grateful.

"It is a most kind and generous offer, my lady," she replied. "I would like to return to the Ring, to build it up, to see my homeland again, and to rebuild it from the ashes. All of us would. But that is just a dream now."

"Empires have been built on lesser dreams than those," the King replied.

"If she wants to leave, let her leave," came a dark voice.

Gwendolyn turned to see one of the King's twin sons, Mardig, looking back at her with an intensity she did not like. His wife also glared back darkly.

"In fact, I believe all of them should leave," Mardig added. "They all left a very conspicuous trail in the desert that will lead the Empire right to us. They will be the source of our downfall."

"Mind your tongue!" the Queen said. "They are family."

"They are no family to us!" Mardig countered. "Perhaps we share ancestors. That was centuries ago."

"You will speak respectfully in my presence, boy," the King said. "Your actions reflect on me—and that is not how we treat strangers."

Mardig reddened, and fell quiet.

The King turned to Gwendolyn.

"Forgive me," he said. "My boy can be rash. He speaks when he should listen."

The King sighed, as Gwen could sense the room looking to him.

“And yet he speaks some truth, my liege,” called out a voice.

Gwen turned to see one of the King’s warriors, at a table filled with warriors, standing at the far side of the chamber.

“The Empire could follow.”

“Throwing them back out in the desert will not prevent that,” called out another soldier, from the other side of the room.

“It just might,” Mardig said.

The King stood slowly, commanding authority, and all eyes turned to him.

“It is true the trail can jeopardize us,” he said slowly, a finality in his voice, as if to end the matter, “and yet, we do not endanger strangers. Ever.”

This last word he said firmly, with the command of a King, and Gwen could see the dissenters humbled. She felt more grateful to him than she could say.

“The trail will be dealt with. At daybreak, I shall dispatch an expedition to venture beyond the Ridge, beyond the sand wall, and erase that trail.”

A gasp spread throughout the room, and Gwen realized that clearly that was a dangerous proposition; she felt awful that her presence here had caused discord.

“I should like to volunteer to go, Father,” said Ludvig, the King’s eldest twin.

“And I shall volunteer to lead it,” said Koldo, his eldest.

“I, too, Father, wish to go,” said Kaden, his teenage son.

“And I,” added his eldest daughter, Ruth.

The only one, Gwen noticed, who did not volunteer was Mardig, who sat there silently, blushing.

The King nodded.

“I am blessed to have brave sons and daughters,” he boomed. “Yes, you can all go. And all of you make sure you return to me.”

“I, too, would like to volunteer,” Kendrick said, standing beside Gwendolyn.

The room looked at him, quiet, clearly caught off guard that a foreigner would join them.

“And I,” said Brandt.

“And I,” said Atme.

All the Silver that remained stood, too, and Gwen felt a rush of pride—mixed with concern for them.

The King pondered this, then finally nodded back gravely.

“Although you are strangers here,” he said, “I shall not deny you all a chance of valor and honor. Your hearts are warriors’ hearts, and your hearts have spoken for you. Know that it will be a dangerous

mission. We have never ventured beyond the sand wall. And some of you may never return."

"I would give my life for this mission," Kendrick said proudly. "After all, if your kingdom is endangered, it is endangered for our sakes."

The King met his eyes, then nodded in approval.

"My liege," Gwendolyn added, "in our land, Kendrick was the leader of the Silver, our most elite knights. There is no finer man in battle, and no finer commander of men. He is known far and wide as a great leader, and I say this not only because he is my brother."

The King examined Kendrick, long and hard, then finally he nodded.

"Then you, Kendrick, on the morrow, shall lead half of my men. Prepare yourselves!" the King called out. "Tomorrow, we ride!"

"TO THE RING!" the King boomed, raising his goblet.

"TO THE RING!" echoed the hundreds of warriors in the room.

Gwen could feel the love, approval, and acceptance all around her, and for the first time in a long time, here, in the company of all these fine knights, she felt like she was home.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Godfrey, joined by Akorth, Fulton, Merek, and Ario, walked through the grand hall of a marble and gold palace, their footsteps echoing as they followed the mysterious Finian woman, who had introduced herself as Silis, and her entourage. After having escorted them to this grand place on the other side of Volusia, Silis had led brought them inside and led them through room after room. Godfrey still had no idea who she was, what she wanted, or why she'd decided to keep them alive—but he wasn't really in a position to ask questions. Her men had escorted them, but Godfrey had a feeling that if they objected, they would pay the price. He was lucky, he knew, to be alive —especially after killing her relatives and taking their jewels.

They were led up a grand, twisting marble staircase, then down a long upper terrace, comprised of a series of marble arches and ornate balusters, wrapping around the palace. It overlooked the city, and as they went, Godfrey took in the breathtaking sight. It was a beautiful city, with its immaculate streets, the canals intersecting them, and the ocean at its feet. Everything shone, and it oozed wealth, and Godfrey reflected that if this place weren't run by such monsters, if its streets weren't stained with the blood of innocents, it could actually be an amazing place to live. Such was the paradox of this culture built on slavery.

As they walked, Godfrey wondered where they were being led, wondered whether he could trust this woman. Once again, oddly, he found himself in the position of having to trust a Finian. This time, though, it felt different. There was something about her that seemed genuine, seemed so different from all the others—after all, she could have easily had him killed back there. For some reason he did not quite grasp, Silis wanted him alive.

They came to a stop before a breathtaking terrace, made of solid gold and positioned right beneath the crashing ocean waves. Luxurious seating was spread out before them, and Godfrey and the others were directed to sit.

Godfrey and the others sank into the red velvet cushions, never having been more comfortable, and as he did, servants arrived, holding out a silver platter filled with delicacies. Godfrey held one up and examined it cautiously, as Silis sat opposite him and examined him with a smile.

"Don't worry," Silis said. "If I wanted you dead, there are much more interesting ways to do it."

Godfrey, realizing she was right, ate the delicacy, and was overcome by how delicious it was. It was sweet and soft, and tasted

like chocolate, but lighter. Realizing how hungry he was, he ate several; beside him, Akorth and Fulton stuffed their mouths and filled their arms with them. Merek and Ario, though, cautious to the end, did not partake, but sat there humorless, on guard.

Silis took it all in, seeming amused.

"Why didn't you kill us then?" Merek asked.

She looked at him with a smile.

"It is certainly not because I like you," she replied. "Or because I care for you or your men."

Silis leaned back and sighed, as a servant handed her a goblet of wine.

"It is because your timing is perfect," she continued. "And you fit my agenda. My Finian cousins, on the far side of the city, whose palace you visited, I despise. They've always been the power-brokers of this city, and they don't like to share. You've done me a great favor in murdering them—you don't even realize how great. In fact, I have been planning it myself, but never quite found the perfect opportunity."

Godfrey looked back, surprised, all of this beginning to make more sense.

"We didn't do it because we are murderers," Godfrey said. "We did it for vengeance, for what they did to our people."

Silis sighed.

"Yes, I know all about that. It is quite the shame. I despise those who go back on their word, and my cousins were quite the experts at that. What they did was dishonorable, and dishonor hurts the Finian name. We can't have that. No, not at all."

Silis paused, examining them all, as if debating. She watched them for a long time, reclining in her chair, and Godfrey could see her mind working. Finally, she leaned forward.

"The Finians are a great race; we have survived here, in the Empire, for thousands of years, the only non-Empire race to do so. We have survived yes, sometimes through guile; but mostly through honor."

Godfrey summed her up and could see the authenticity in her eyes.

"I believe you," he said. "Despite your cousins. You certainly redeem them. What I don't understand is what you want from us—aside from congratulating us for doing your dirty work."

"If you really want to thank us, then you would let us go," Merek chimed in.

Silis smiled and gestured to her men: they stepped aside from their positions guarding the door.

"Then go," she stated calmly. "You are free."

Godfrey and the others looked back at her skeptically.

"Just like that?" Ario asked.

She nodded.

"Just behind our palace lie the city gates," she said. "Walk right through them: I promise, I will not stop you."

"We've heard that before," Merek said. "You won't stop us—but you'll put a knife in our back when we're halfway through."

She laughed.

"Look around you," she said. "You are surrounded by two dozen men with daggers and swords. You, on the other hand, are unarmed—and, I dare say," she added, looking at Akorth and Fulton, stuffing their faces, with amusement, "hardly fit for battle. Why would I go through all the trouble of waiting if I wanted you dead? It's much easier to do it here."

A heavy silence hung in the air and Godfrey, unsure, looked at her, wondering if she were telling the truth.

"We're really free to go?" he asked.

Silis smiled.

"As free as can be," she said.

Godfrey and the others shared a puzzled look; he believed her. And, strangely enough, having his freedom made him uncertain what to do.

"If you want to go through those gates," she continued, "be my guest. But, so you know, there is no warm home outside awaiting you. The desert is a wasteland. Your people are dead. You have no village to return to. Go out there, and you'll be dead by high noon—or caught by a slaver."

Godfrey looked at her, narrowing his eyes.

"Then what do you suggest?" he asked.

Silis smiled.

"I am offering you a place here, with me, in my castle. Consider it my thank you."

"But why would you do that?" he asked.

She sighed.

"I can trust you all," she said. "It's not every day I meet someone who I can. You're not Empire, you're not Finian, and we have a shared interest. Together, we can subvert the other Finians and I can reclaim the rightful rule of our branch of the family. I, too, wish to be free; I no longer wish to answer to my cousins. Nor do I wish to answer to the Empire. We share a common goal: to free Volusia. To spark a revolution. It is what your people died for. And I am prepared to carry on the cause."

Silis sighed, sizing them up.

"You have shown an uncanny ability to survive," she said, "a

craftiness and resourcefulness that greatly impresses me. You don't look the part, which is an even greater asset. I believe I can use you to advance the cause."

Godfrey looked at the others, and he saw Merek and Ario nod back approvingly. He leaned forward.

"What would you have us do?" he asked.

She smiled.

"The list is quite long," she replied. "It takes a lot of work to overthrow a city. The more pressing issue, I presume, is to rectify the injustice that is being done to your friends, the slave survivors."

Godfrey's heart stopped.

"Survivors?" he asked.

Silis looked at him, puzzled.

"You didn't know?" she asked. "Your friend, the leader—Darius. He lives, along with a few of his people. Though I'm afraid he won't be alive very long. They've sentenced him to the arena, to fight as a gladiator. That is a fight no one can win. Unless we change the outcome."

Godfrey's heart welled with optimism; here, finally, was a chance to set wrongs right, to make up for what he had done to Darius and the others. He suddenly felt alive with a renewed sense of purpose.

"How?" Godfrey asked.

Silis smiled wide.

"There are many ways, my friend," she said, "to win a war."

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Darius, head in his hands, elbows on his knees, sat in the small stone cell of the gladiators' holding pen, devastated. He had never felt so alone, so dejected. It was definitely, he realized, the low point of his life.

Every muscle in his body ached, but that wasn't what troubled him most; he closed his eyes and shook his head and tried to shake the awful images of the day's battle from his mind. He saw, again and again, Desmond and Luzi being killed, the other boys dying, Raj being injured. He could not see the victory, but only the deaths, the suffering. Two of his close friends, boys he felt sure would live forever, killed on one day—and a third, mortally wounded. The images, so deeply embedded in his mind, would not go away.

Darius looked up, bleary-eyed, into the small holding pen, and saw the two other boys who remained here with him: Raj, lying on his side, nursing his wounds, and, ironically, Drok, the boy who just would not die. Darius knew that, somehow, they would be forced to fight again, and he knew that the next day of combat would be the worst of all. All three of them would be dead. He wanted it to be over now.

But Darius was so beat up, like the others, he barely had the strength to move, much less to fight again. Morg, he realized, had spoken the truth on that first day, when he'd said they would all die, and to prepare themselves. But how could one really prepare oneself for death?

Darius looked over, exhausted, at the sound of an iron door swinging open, and he saw Morg strut in, alone, this time not needing any guards. He knew they were too beat up, too wounded, to resist.

He stood there, staring down at them, hands on hips and with a self-satisfied smile.

"You cannot win, you know," he said, examining Darius.

Darius lowered his head back into his hands, trying to nurse the pain, trying to make Morg and everything else go away.

"You should have accepted my offer," he added.

Darius, head down, ignored him, too tired to respond.

"None of my gladiators have survived the final day of matches. Not one. Not in all the years I've been here."

Finally, Darius looked up.

"I feat not death," he said, his voice cold and hard, parched from lack of water. "I fear only a dishonorable life."

Morg, realizing it was a dig at him, smirked back.

"And yet, you can still avoid this," he replied. "All you have to do

is agree. Agree to end the fight in your own arena, where you will be spared. Agree to let the others die. Drok, you hate anyway. And look at your friend Raj: he is dying as we speak."

Darius grimaced back.

"But he is not dead yet," he replied. "And as long as he lives, I shall remain by his side."

Morg scowled.

"You are a fool," he said. "You will be swallowed alive by your honor and go down to the grave with it."

Darius managed to smile back.

"You will never understand," Darius said. "My dream on this earth is not to merely live—but to live and fight with honor, with valor. If I were immortal, I have would have nothing to lose, and those things would mean nothing to me. My dream is made possible precisely because I am mortal. I have something to sacrifice, something to lose. And that is what makes it honorable. My dream is a dream of mortals."

Morg grimaced.

"You will die," he said.

"Only cowards die," Darius replied. "The valiant live on in death."

Morg, enraged, glared down at him. And with nothing left to say, he turned and stormed out, slamming the iron door behind him, leaving Darius more alone than he'd ever been.

* * *

Darius sat at Raj's side, as his friend moaned through the night, clasping his shoulder. Darius did not need to look at his festering wound to know it was in dire shape, to know he could not live. Raj lay there, wincing in agony, and as flies landed on his wound he did not even have the strength to swat them away.

Darius could see the light fading in his last friend's eyes, and he was overwhelmed with grief. Here was Raj, the most confident of his friends, the most daring, the one who Darius had been sure would never die—and he, too, was going the unstoppable way of death.

"You will be fine," Darius said, clasping his shoulder after a bad bout of moaning.

Raj shook his head.

"You always were a bad liar," he said.

Darius frowned.

"There is no way I will let you die."

Raj winced.

“Even you, my friend, cannot stop that.”

Darius shrugged.

“We have one more battle left to fight. We will fight it together. And we shall die together.”

“I cannot fight,” he said. “Not anymore. I will be chained to you as dead weight. Leave me behind. Let me die. Spare yourself.”

Darius shook his head.

“No man left behind,” he said, insistent. “Not now. Not ever.”

Raj sighed, clearly knowing how stubborn Darius was.

“Look at me. I cannot even stand,” Raj said.

Darius smiled.

“Then I shall kneel by your side and we shall fight together.”

Raj reached out and clasped his hand.

“You are my brother, Darius,” he said. “You have proved it now, more than ever. But don’t die for me. It’s not worth it.”

Darius looked him firmly in the eye.

“You said it,” Darius said. “*Brother*. I have always wanted to have a brother, and that is a word that has great meaning to me. Brothers do not abandon each other; they do not leave each other behind. That is what it means to be a brother. Brothers are forged for times like this. And not even death can stand in the way of them.”

Raj fell silent, breathing hard for a long time, gasping, then finally, he clasped Darius’s hand and nodded.

“Very well then, brother,” he said. “Tomorrow, if I live, we shall kill as many as we can. And we shall go down fighting together.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Volusia stood before the immense arched golden doors to the capital, soaring a hundred feet high, the only thing standing between the capital city and the hordes of Empire soldiers waiting to destroy it. She reached up and ran her fingers lightly on the intricate carvings, admiring the handiwork it must have taken. She remembered reading it had taken a hundred men a hundred years to carve these doors of solid gold—doors that had never been penetrated.

"Do not worry, Goddess," said the commander of her armies, Gibvin. "These gates will hold."

She turned and faced her entourage of generals and advisors, and marveled that they had no idea of what she was thinking. What they could never understand was that she had seen her destiny. It had come to her in a vision. And she was prepared, no matter what, to fulfill it.

"Do you think I fear but a million men?" she replied, smiling.

He stared back, puzzled.

"Then why have we come out here, Goddess?" asked another advisor.

She surveyed her men coolly, until she was ready to issue the command.

"Open the gates," she commanded calmly.

Her advisors stared back at her as if she were mad.

"*Open* them!?" her commander asked.

Her icy glare was her only response, and they knew her well enough by know not to ask twice.

She watched as panic spread across their faces.

"If we open these gates," Gibvin said, "the army will come rushing in. That is what they are waiting for. Our city will be lost. All our efforts will be lost."

She shook her head.

"Do not question me," she replied. "And do not fear for yourselves. After I pass through them you shall close them behind me."

"Close them behind you?" he repeated. "That would leave you out there alone, facing an army alone. It will mean your death."

She smiled back ever so slightly.

"You still don't see," she said. "I am a goddess—and goddesses cannot die."

She turned to the men manning the gates, fixed her gaze on them, and her man, fear in their faces, rushed forward and began to turn the massive golden cranks. A creaking filled the air as slowly, the golden

doors began to open, one foot at a time.

As they opened, the orange rays of the setting suns burst through, illuminating Volusia, making her look and feel like a true goddess. They were opened just two feet, just enough for her to pass through them.

She walked slowly through them, her shoulders brushing past the edge of the doors, and exited the city, leaving it behind her, stepping out barefoot on the hot sands of the open desert.

Behind her, she could feel the wind of the doors closing, and a moment later, she heard and felt a decisive slam behind her, shaking the ground, the echo of metal. She knew there was no turning back now. Now, she was out here alone for good—and that was what she wanted.

As Volusia took one step after the next, she saw before her the massive Empire army, spread out into all its legions, covering the horizon like ants, all beginning to rouse at the sight of her, all beginning to charge her way.

They charged at full force, a great thunder rising, all bearing down right for her. Joining them were many new legions, dressed in the all-black armor of the Empire, clearly dispatched from the Knights of the Seven, surely the first of the reinforcements that had arrived to bring down the capital.

Volusia smiled. The Knights of the Seven must not have enjoyed her gift very much.

Volusia had watched this morning as all the armies had gathered, as the men of the Seven had joined them. She had seen all of the siege equipment being brought by the Knights of the Seven—the catapults, the battering rams, the entire horizon filled with devices of war meant to destroy the city—and Volusia knew it would only be a matter of time until they did. She was not about to sit back and wait. No, she was never one to defend. She was always one to attack.

Attack she would—even if she had to do it by herself.

Volusia walked fearlessly, one woman—one goddess—against an army. With every step she took, she knew she was walking into her destiny. She felt invincible. She truly felt herself to be a goddess. No one in the world had been able to stop her, just as she'd known from the day she was born. Not even her own mother. She had marched all the way to the Empire capital, and she wasn't about to stop now. She knew that to have power, one had to seize it—and even more importantly, one had to hold onto it. She did not need other men to fight her wars. She had, she knew, all the power she needed, on her own.

Volusia heard the tremendous thunder, felt the dust already reaching her, as the army bore down on her, now but a few hundred

yards away. They charged, the horizon filled with men on massive horses, Razifs, zertas, elephants, carrying every sort of weapon imaginable, emitting fierce battle cries as they raced for their prize. She could see their faces already, see them salivating at the sight, at having a chance to kill the leader out in the open, all by herself. As if it were too good to be true. They all must have, she imagined, assumed she had given up, had come to talk terms, or was committing suicide.

But Volusia had other plans. Better plans.

The army bore down on her, closer and closer, now a hundred yards away, and gaining speed. She heard the great clanking of armor, smelled the sweat, and saw the bloodlust in men's faces. Some faces showed fear, even though they marched, an entire army, against a woman alone. They, the wise ones, must have known something was different about her, something to be feared, if she were willing to face an army on her own.

Volusia was ready to show them.

She closed her eyes and raised her arms up to the heavens, and slowly raised them higher and higher.

As she did, there came a tremendous humming noise, like a million locusts rising from the earth. It grew louder and louder and louder, and all around Volusia, the desert floor began to crack and burst. First one claw appeared, pulling itself up through a fissure in the earth. Then another.

Then another.

Thousands of small creatures—gargoyles with black wings sprouting behind them—began to pull themselves up from the earth. They had slimy back scales and long sharp fangs and wings that buzzed in a way that would strike terror even in the bravest warrior's heart. They blinked, summoned from the dead, with their large, glowing orange eyes, eyes filled with a desire for blood.

Volusia raised her hands higher, and her army of undead creatures emerged from the earth and rose into the sky, blackening it as the second suns fell. She directed them, and they rushed forward, and descended, as one, for the army racing to kill her.

The first gargoyle reached the first soldier, opening its jaws, revealing its razor-sharp fangs, and sinking them into the man's throat, killing him instantly. The first cry of death rose out.

Then another struck.

Then another.

Soon the sky was filled with the screeching of a million black gargoyles, with an endless lust for blood, mixed with the cries of men, falling where they stood. Volusia laughed as she watched. This was the destiny she had seen for herself.

How foolish they had been to think that they alone could kill her. After all, they were only an army.

And she—she was a goddess.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Kendrick stood atop the Ridge joined by dozens of other knights, among them Brandt, Atme, the half-dozen Silver, and two dozen knights from the Ridge, all of them looking out at the desert countryside that lay before them. They all stood on the platform, and as the great cranks were turned and the ropes groaned, they were all slowly being lowered, one notch at a time, down the other side, down to the Great Waste.

Kendrick could hardly believe he was back here, but a day later, this place that had almost killed him, this place he had barely escaped with his life. He could hardly believe he was back in armor again, beneath the desert suns, his men by his side and joined by new knights, men whose faces and names he still barely recognized. He was not still fully recovered, he knew, still a bit weak from his ordeal; yet he felt compelled to go on this mission to cover up their trail for the safety of the Ridge. His honor compelled him, and when honor was at stake, he never said no.

Kendrick studied the barren landscape as they were lowered, the suns already increasing in intensity, saw the huge sand wall, swirling in the distance, and knew that once they rode past it, they would be embraced in a hostile world of nothingness. He tightened his grip on his new sword and hoped they would be able to find a way back. He did not look forward to a prolonged stay in this desert once again.

Kendrick looked over at his new command, these knights of the Ridge, a dozen of them now answering to him, with a professional warrior's eye. They all seemed to be fine knights, their armor and weapons resplendent and well cared for, all with a hardened look that he had come to know well, the look of men who feared little. These knights, he could see, had an intimate banter with one another, having already forged their friendships over a lifetime. Kendrick could not help feeling like an outsider, a funny feeling for him, as he had always been at the center of a brotherhood of warriors he had known his whole life. It didn't help that they were all giving Kendrick the cold shoulder, barely acknowledging him; clearly, they resented the fact that an outside was allowed to join their group—much less appointed commander over them. They all stood side by side, hands on hips, looking out at the desert, their backs to him, ignoring Kendrick and his men.

Kendrick could understand—he would have resented a foreign soldier commanding him, too, and he had not requested the position. All he had done was volunteer to help the King erase the trail.

As they were lowered, further and further, Kendrick figured it

was best to break the ice now, to get any hard feelings out in the open and clear the air before they had a chance to harden.

He stepped forward and addressed the men.

"I understand your reluctance to have a foreign commander over you," Kendrick said to the men, their backs to him, and they slowly turned and looked his way. "I did not come here to take the place of your commanders. I come only to serve with you, to aid and assist you in your mission."

One of them, a tall knight with a shaved head and a long, braided beard, looked hard at Kendrick.

"I have been commander of these men from the time I could walk," he said, his voice icy cold. "Then you show up and take my position. I have no respect for you—none of us do. To gain respect in the Ridge, one has to earn it. All of us have earned it. And until you do, you are nothing to us."

The knight turned his back abruptly, and the platform, all the way lowered, touched the ground, shaking with a loud thud. The wooden gates opened, and one at a time, the men filtered out, immediately mounting the horses that had been lowered and were awaiting them.

Kendrick, stung by the exchange, looked over at Brandt and Atme, who looked back at him with the same sense of apprehension and bitterness as the knights of the Ridge mounted their horses and took off, into the desert, leaving a cloud of dust, not even waiting for them—not even waiting for their new commander.

Kendrick mounted his horse, Brandt and Atme and the others by his side, and prepared to follow. It would be a long journey, he knew, to earn these men's respect. But as he kicked his horse and they all took off, into the dust, Kendrick did not care. He was not driven by a need for these men's respect or approval; he was compelled by honor, by sacred duty.

And as he charged into the desert, the sound of horses filling his ears, he vowed to perform that duty, whether these men wanted him here or not, regardless of whatever dangers lay out there for him beyond that wall of dust.

* * *

Gwendolyn walked alongside King MacGil as they strolled the peak of the Ridge, just the two of them, taking in the magnificent views as the King gave her his tour. They had been followed by his entire entourage as they had crossed the capital, crossed the lake, and had taken the platform up here so that they could watch Kendrick and

the others depart on their mission. Once they'd reached the top the King had left his men behind and just the two of them strolled now, the wind blowing in Gwen's hair.

They finally came to a stop and looked out at the horizon; Gwen felt a pit in her stomach at the sight of the Great Waste, hoping to never lay eyes on it again.

They stood there in silence, side by side, looking out for a long time, until finally the King spoke.

"I was impressed with your request," the King said to her.

"My request?" Gwen asked.

He nodded.

"I offered you the choice of touring any part of my kingdom—and your only request was to watch your brother depart. You could have asked to see my jewels, my treasures, the vaults, the armory, the ballrooms, the vineyards, the gardens…. Instead, you ask to come to this desolate place, to tour our fortifications and to see your men off. That is the request of a true leader, a selfless leader."

Gwen smiled back.

"My men are my jewels," she said. "They mean more to me than anything. And when they are in danger, there is nowhere else I could be except by their side."

The King nodded.

"You and I," he said, "we are the same. Leaders do not sleep when their people are in danger. It is the curse—and the blessing—of responsibility."

Gwen nodded, happy to be able to talk with someone who understood. In some ways, she wished she had never been Queen; and yet in other ways, she felt it was her destiny.

Gwen laid her hands on the stone railing and looked out at the horizon, watching Kendrick and the others ride off, hundreds of feet below, creating a cloud of dust as they went. They charged for the horizon, for the sand wall, and as she looked straight down she suddenly felt nauseous, and pulled back.

"The drop gets you every time," the King said with a smile. "I have been coming up here for years, and now, as an old man, I can't tolerate it as I used to." He winked. "But don't tell my subjects that."

Gwendolyn smiled.

"You are hardly an old man," she said. "You are far younger than my father was."

The King shook his head and looked away sadly.

Gwen watched Kendrick ride off, disappearing, and her heart ached. She closed her eyes and prayed that he accomplish his quest and return safely. She could not tolerate any more loss, not after all she'd been through. He was all she had left of family.

Gwen opened her eyes and looked out, further out into the horizon, and thought of Thorgrin, of Guwayne, out there somewhere on a vast and lonely sea. She longed for them to come back to her, as she would for food or drink. The loneliness hurt her so badly, she could physically feel it, as a heaviness on her chest. It was as if a part of her was out there with them, lost somewhere.

"You miss your son, don't you?" the King asked.

Gwendolyn turned and blushed to see him looking at her, reading her mind. She realized this King was much more intuitive than she had suspected.

Her eyes welled, and she nodded.

"I understand," he replied. "More than you know. I miss mine, too."

She looked at him in surprise.

"Yours?" she asked. "Is your son gone away somewhere?"

"No," the King said sadly, shaking his head. "Worse. He's right here, in my city. But he is lost to me."

Gwendolyn furrowed her brow, puzzled.

"I don't understand," she said.

He sighed.

"Two of my children," the King replied, "are held prisoner to our religious leader, and his cult, which has spread through my city like a vine. It is a false religion, preached by a false prophet, and yet they all flock to him. Everywhere are his teachings, so much so that I can scarcely control my own people, and two of my children have fallen for it. They are as lost to me as your son is to you. Except your son might return—and my children never will."

Gwendolyn saw the sadness in his eyes, and she felt for him. There were so many questions she wanted to ask, but now, she knew, was not the time.

The King reached out and touched the stone rail, ran his hand along it, as they watched their men fade into the desert.

"These stones are ancient," he said. "As ancient as the wall of your canyon. Have you noticed their shape?"

Gwen looked back, baffled.

"The Ring and the Ridge," he said. "They are two sides of the same coin. They are a replica of each other, bear the exact dimensions. Your Canyon, your Ring, is precisely the same diameter as our Ridge, each of them shaped in a circle. Look around you: our Ridge is circular, and it would fit perfectly inside your Canyon."

Gwen turned and looked and was amazed to see he was right: the vast Ridge spread out in a circle, and its width appeared to her to be about the same as that of the Canyon. She wondered what it all meant.

“How is it possible?” she asked.

“There is so much still you don’t know,” he said. “So much I have to tell you. We are two halves of the same circle, separated at birth. The Ring and the Ridge: they need each, they have always needed each other, to be complete.”

He looked long and hard at Gwendolyn.

“You think we have saved your lives,” he said, “but what you don’t understand is that there is a reason you have come here. You need us, yes—but we need you, too.”

Gwen was perplexed.

“You didn’t arrive here by chance,” he added. “You arrived by destiny. Your entire voyage—your exile, your crossing the sea, your crossing the Waste—it was all meant for this.”

Gwen stared back in wonder, trying to process it all, still not understanding the extent of it.

“But why?” she asked.

The King looked away, silent for a long time.

Finally, he said: “Can I trust you to keep a secret?”

Gwen’s heart was pounding as she wondered what he might say next. She nodded.

“I want to tell you something that no one else knows,” he said. “Not even my family. Not even my own wife.”

Gwen could feel her heart beating as the one out there as she waited, feeling that whatever it was, it would be momentous.

“The Ridge is dying.”

Gwen gasped.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Everything you see here, all of its bounty, its beauty, all of it will soon be dead.”

“But how?” she asked.

“Our lake is our source of life,” he said. “And it is drying up. It has been, slowly, for years. Soon enough, everything you see here will be barren desert, swallowed up by the Great Waste, by the suns, just like all our surrounding. Ragon foresaw it all: and that was why he left.”

“Ragon?” she asked.

He nodded back solemnly.

“Argon’s brother. Our sorcerer. He lived here for centuries. And then, he was exiled. That is the official history, anyway. But what no one knows is that he was never exiled. He left on his own.”

Gwen felt increasingly confused. She never considered that Argon had a brother, or that he was the sorcerer of the Ridge. She suddenly wondered if somehow he could help her find Thorgrin.

“But why?” she asked. “Why would he leave? Where did he go?”

“He left because he saw what was coming. And he knew he had to leave before it was too late.”

Gwen was still puzzled.

“I still don’t understand.”

“We need you, Gwendolyn,” he said. “*I* need you.”

He reached out and clasped her shoulders, and he stared back at her with such intensity that it scared her. She suddenly wanted to be anywhere but here; she did not want to hear whatever it was he had to say next.

“The Ridge is dying, Gwendolyn—and I am, too.”

As she looked back at him, she suddenly saw what had been bothering her, in the back of her mind, this whole time: the frail look in his eyes, the pallor of his skin. She sensed that what he said was true. He was dying. Everything here, in this beautiful place, was about to change.

And she suddenly knew from that look in his eye, the same look her father had given her before his death, that he would want her to be the next Queen.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Darius squinted into the light as he exited the long, stone tunnel and entered into the roar of the arena. The crowd, more packed than ever, all here for the grand finale, stomped and cheered, the sound deafening. Darius was unable to even hear his own shackles rattling as they dug into his bloody and bruised ankles, Drok on one side and on the other Raj, limping heavily, Darius holding him up.

They moved slowly, as fast as Raj could go, until they reached the center of the arena, Darius all the while on guard for Drok to jump him from behind. But Drok, for some reason, was biding his time—perhaps, Darius guessed, to attack him at a more opportune time. Or perhaps to wait to learn the rules of this final match first.

Darius stood there, waiting, his heart pounding with adrenaline as he scanned the foreign crowd, but this time more resigned than nervous. He knew death was coming for him, and he no longer feared it—as long as he died honorably.

A horn sounded and the crowd suddenly cheered as an iron gate was opened at the far end of the arena. Strutting out of it came Morg, raising his arms out wide, catering to the crowd, removing his hat with a bow, waving and turning in each direction until they slowly quieted. Morg was just megalomaniacal enough, Darius knew, to think that all these people were cheering for him.

"Fellow citizens of the Empire!" Morg boomed. "I present to you today the third and final battle of the gladiators!"

The crowd shouted, stomping their feet, shaking the place, and Morg waited a long time until they finally quieted again.

"Today," he boomed, "three gladiators remain. On this day, they shall die a gladiator's death!"

The crowd cheered.

"No gladiator has ever survived this final match," Morg continued, "but if one of them should, then the victor will earn the right to fight in the grandest arena of all: the Capital Arena."

The crowd cheered and Morg turned, grinned cruelly at Darius, then turned his back and strutted out of the stadium, the cell slamming behind him. A series of trumpets sounded. The spectators roared, and Darius wondered what they would throw at him this time.

Darius felt a tug at his ankle, and he looked over to see Drok scowling at him.

"Don't think you're going to survive this," Drok snarled. "If whatever comes out of those gates doesn't kill you, I will."

Darius had had enough of this boy, and he yanked his leg, snapping the chains, jerking him back in the other direction.

“I might not survive,” Darius said, “but if I go down, you’re coming with me.”

Drok scowled and began to walk menacingly toward him; Darius, unafraid, walked forward to meet him—when he felt a tug on his other ankle and saw Raj, kneeling on the ground and shaking his head.

“Don’t,” Raj said. “That’s what he wants. Conserve your energy.”

Another chorus of horns sounded and Darius turned to see six cell doors open and six Empire soldiers, huge, dressed in black armor and faceplates, riding black horses, and wielding long halberds, come charging out toward them, to the delight of the crowd.

Darius braced himself and realized that it was not nearly as bad as it could be; after all, there were no exotic beasts or weaponry, no other Empire tricks, as he had expected. Of course, they were still facing men on horses, still outnumbered two to one—and with Raj wounded, more like three to one—and with Drok at his back, that made the odds even worse. Darius wondered if Drok would even fight or just use the opportunity to kill him. Did Drok even care about living?

“Stay close to me!” Darius yelled to Raj. “Stay low, and raise your shield!”

Darius clenched and unclenched the hilt of the sword they had given him, barely sharp enough to meet men in battle, and certainly not sharp enough to sever these shackles binding him to the others. There came the familiar sound of horses clomping as the first of the soldiers reached him, and Darius rushed forward to greet him.

Darius raised his shield and the soldier’s halberd met it with a great clang, the superior weaponry, the soldier’s superior size, and his momentum from riding all rocking Darius, sending him stumbling backward. It felt like an explosion; his ears rang and he felt the vibrations in his hand run up his arm.

But Darius did not let go.

In the same motion, Darius managed to swing around and chop the legs of the horse out from under it; he flinched, hating to hurt the animals. But it was life or death, and he knew he had no choice.

The crowd cheered as the horse neighed and fell straight down, face-first in the dirt, and the rider fell off.

Wasting no time, Darius charged and reached him just as he was turning, and stabbed and killed him before he could arise.

Just as Darius stripped the soldier’s superior sword, another soldier arrived, this one leaping from his horse and landing on Darius, tackling him. The crowd roared as the two went tumbling in the dirt.

Darius broke free and threw him off, and he got up and lunged for the soldier, seeing an opening, prepared to finish him off—when

suddenly, his chain tightened. He turned and realized that Raj's dead weight was chaining him back. Darius swung, but missed the soldier by a few inches.

The soldier rebounded and leapt to his feet, bearing down on Darius and swinging for his head. Darius blocked with his shield and swung, and the soldier blocked. Back and forth they went, swords and shields and armor clanging.

Darius heard the galloping and knew the other soldiers were getting closer and that he didn't have much time. He was well-matched with his opponent, and he knew he had to do something quickly, before he was outnumbered.

Suddenly there came the sound of dirt, and his opponent cried out and grabbed at his visor as a cloud of it entered his eyes, blinding him. Darius, puzzled looked over his shoulder to see Raj on his knees, breathing hard, and realized he had just thrown a fistful of sand.

The soldier dropped his sword, and Darius charged and stabbed him, killing him.

Darius looked back at Raj gratefully.

"You still have some fight left in you yet," Darius said.

Raj just smiled back, too weak to talk.

Darius heard the horses and he turned and looked over to see Drok bracing himself as soldiers targeted him for a change. They charged right for him, and Drok waited until the last moment, then dove to the ground and stretched out his legs. As he did, he used his feet to lift the shackles, until the chains were taut. Darius felt the tug on his own ankles.

Darius went flying as the shackles tripped up the horses. The horses, entangled, went down, rolling, their riders falling off, one of them crying out as he was crushed beneath his horse. Drok set his sights on the other, rolled over and, wasting no time, wrapped his chain around one's neck and squeezed. He then pulled a dagger from the soldier's waist, reached around, and stabbed him in the chest.

The crowd cheered in pleasure.

Darius regained his feet and stood there, unsteady, yanked back and forth by the chains. He could not freely choose his direction, and he knew he had to get Drok to work with him—it was the only way.

"We can work together and save ourselves," Darius called out to Drok, "or we can oppose each other and lose!"

Drok turned, and to Darius's surprise, nodded back in agreement.

Darius looked up to see two more soldiers bearing down on them.

"You take the one on the left, and I'll take the one on the right!" Darius called out, as they both stood there, side by side, facing them.

Drok scowled as he examined the oncoming opponents. To Darius surprise, for the first time, he seemed to be in agreement.

“Separate as far as you can,” Drok yelled. “We shall divide them!”

Darius liked the idea; he ran in one direction while Drok ran in the other, forcing the oncoming horses to split apart.

Darius braced himself as one of the soldiers veered for him and swung his long halberd for his head. He raised his shield, and the blow knocked him back, the sound of smashing metal echoing in his ear. He stumbled backwards and his arm stung, but he had avoided its deadly edge.

The crowd oohed as the soldier circled wide and bore down on him again. This time, though, the soldier veered for Raj, clearly going after the easier victim.

Darius, realizing what he was doing, stepped out in front of Raj, blocking his path, and bracing himself as the halberd came down. He knew a bold move was required if he was to come out of this encounter unscathed, and he waited until the last moment, then raised his sword and charged, catching the soldier off guard. Darius aimed not for the horse, or for the rider—but rather, for the long, exposed shaft of the halberd.

It was a perfect strike. He chopped the shaft in half, and its shaft and head severed and went tumbling down to the ground.

The soldier rode past him harmlessly, swinging with a broken shaft and missing—and Darius wasted no time. He ran for the severed shaft, the blade at its end, snatched it from the ground, raised it high, turned, and hurled it.

Darius watched as the blade tumbled end over end through the air and lodged itself in the soldier’s back as he rode away. The crowd shouted in delight as the soldier cried out, arched his back, then fell sideways off his horse.

Drok, meanwhile, faced down a soldier as he swung with his halberd; Drok waited for the last moment, then jumped to the side, in a counterintuitive move, landing right in the horse’s path instead of away from it—and as he did so, he turned and ran his sword up underneath the horse’s throat, right up through his skull.

The horse collapsed down, just missing Drok, and its rider fell face first over its head, tumbling to the ground. The crowd oohed, and Drok scrambled to his hands and knees, ran forward, grabbed the dropped halberd, and brought it down on the back of the soldier’s head, just as he tried to get up.

The crowd screamed, jumping to their feet, going crazy, as Drok, Darius, and Raj all stood there, breathing hard. Darius looked around in amazement. He could not believe it. It was a scene of carnage all around them—and somehow, they had won.

After a long bout of applause and cheers, Darius began to wonder if the day’s match was over—when suddenly, more horns sounded.

Darius felt a pit in his stomach, and he braced himself, wondering what it could be.

There came a sudden rumbling, and Darius did not like the way it sounded—or felt beneath his feet. The entire ground shook.

The crowd was whipped into a frenzy as a huge iron cell door opened and there came a trumpet call. Darius's heart fell: he did not need the doors to open to know what was coming next.

Bursting out of the doors, on the opposite end of the arena, there suddenly came two of the largest elephants Darius had ever seen, one black and one white, with long curving ivory tusks that reached up twenty feet. The crowd went mad as the elephants, each ridden by a knight in black armor, charged right for them.

Darius looked up at the elephants, blocking the sky, casting a long shadow, and he knew he was looking death in the face. There was no way they could survive this.

The white elephant slowed and veered off, doing a tour, slowly circling the arena, taking in the cries of adulation from the crowd—while the black one continued to charge for them. Darius held his breath as it came bearing down and seemed to set its sights on Raj.

Darius stood in its path, blocking Raj.

"Let me die," Raj called out, his voice weak. "Save yourself!"

"NEVER!" Darius yelled back, over the din of the elephant.

Darius stood there, protecting his friend, sword held high, knowing he was going to die but that at least he would die protecting his brother. Darius prepared for his death, flashing before him all the people he'd known and loved. He especially found himself thinking of Loti.

As the elephant got closer, Darius raised his sword, knowing it was futile but needing to go down, at least, as a warrior—and as he braced himself for death, something strange happened. As Darius watched, the elephant suddenly slowed, and then swayed, as if it were sick. Its huge eyes rolled up in its head, and it suddenly fell sideways, shaking the ground as it landed with a crash. Its momentum carried it forward, and it went skidding along the ground, like an unstoppable mountain of dirt sliding right for him. It slid so fast, and there was no time to run. Darius was sure he would soon be buried by this avalanche.

But Darius stood his ground, determined to protect his friend, whatever might come.

The elephant slid closer and closer, then finally, amazingly, it stopped, just a few feet away from Darius, frozen, dead.

The crowd let out an astonished gasp, clearly all puzzled as to what had happened. Darius, too, was baffled. Something, clearly, had killed the elephant, and yet no weapon had touched it. Was it

sickness?

Darius saw foam coming from its mouth, and he wondered if it was poisoned. But by whom? And why? Had someone been looking out for him? Who was there left here in the city of Volusia that would care about him?

Darius had no time to figure it out; its rider had been thrown when it fell, and now he gained his feet and charged for Darius. Darius barely had time to react as the soldier hurled a spear at him, dodging at the last moment as it whirled by his head.

A moment later the soldier was on him, lowering his head and tackling Darius down to the ground. Darius was shocked the at the weight of this Empire soldier, in his all-black armor; it felt as if a mountain of steel had landed on top of him.

Darius tried to break free, but the soldier held him tight, constraining his arms. Darius felt as if the life were being crushed out of him, and wondered if he could break free—when suddenly, the soldier's eyes burst open.

Darius heard the rattling of chains, and he looked up to see Raj on top of the soldier, wrapping his chains about his throat from behind. Raj used whatever life energy he had left in him, and squeezed and squeezed, until finally the soldier got off of Darius.

Darius rolled out from under him and quickly grabbed his sword. He turned back to see the soldier now lying atop Raj, who was on his back, still squeezing the chain but losing strength. The soldier would soon break free.

Darius ran forward, raising his sword high, and stabbed the soldier in the heart.

Finally, he stopped moving.

An elephant's trumpet sounded, and Darius turned to see the other elephant turning and bearing down on them. This one, clearly, had not been poisoned, and Darius was shocked at how fast something so big could move, as it charged, the earth quaking with each step.

As its shade began to cover Darius, Darius knew he would not be so lucky a second time. Whatever had saved him the first time was no longer at his disposal. Now he would have no choice but to fight this monumental beast.

As Darius braced himself, he heard a sudden shout, followed by a rattling of chains, and he turned and was shocked to see Drok charging for Raj, death in his eyes. Darius could not understand what was happening.

He turned and ran and blocked Drok's path, standing between him and Raj.

"What do you hope to gain?" Darius called out, baffled. "Even if you kill us both, you will not be the victor. You will still have to kill

the elephant—and you cannot do that alone! You need us!"

"Fool!" Drok yelled back. "We're already dead here. There is no chance to win—there never has been. But before I die, I want to see you both dead first!"

Darius scowled.

"If you want to kill him," Darius said, "you'll have to get through me!"

"Don't worry!" Drok called out. "You'll be next!"

Drok lunged with his sword and Darius blocked it with his shield, and swung back. Drok blocked Darius's blow, and back and forth they went, well-matched, driving each other back and forth, as far as their shackles would allow.

Drok reached down and yanked on the chains, and Darius stumbled forward, right toward him, off balance. Drok then brought down his sword, and Darius dodged it just in time. Darius then swung for his back, but Drok wheeled and blocked it. Neither could gain an edge.

Darius heard a thundering coming toward them, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the sky blacken and the elephant bearing down. He knew he needed to turn his attention to the elephant, but Drok would just not break away.

Darius knew he had to make a risky move. He saw an opening, lunged forward, and tackled Drok, dropping his weapons and driving him down to the ground.

At the same moment, the elephant lowered its tusk for them and just missed Darius. But Darius heard a sickening cry, heard the sound of tusk impacting flesh, and he looked back to see, with horror, that the elephant had impaled Raj. Its tusk went though one end and out the other.

Raj shrieked as he was lifted up into the air, and as the elephant lifted him higher and higher, Darius felt a tug at his chains, then felt himself suddenly being hoisted high into the air. It took Drok along with them, the three of them dangling high in the air, a good twenty feet above ground, as the elephant took off. The crowd went wild.

Darius felt as if every bone in his body was going to break as he bounced up and down, dangling in the air upside down, his chain snagged over the elephant's tusk—until finally, gratefully, the elephant tired of them and threw them.

Darius, Raj, and Drok, all still chained together, went flying and all landed on the ground with a thud, Darius feeling as if his ribs broke as he did.

The crowd roared in delight, and the elephant thundered away to the far end of the arena, taking a victory lap before circling back for more.

Darius opened one his eyes as he forced himself to his hands and knees, face covered in dirt, and looked over to see his friend Raj lying there, but a few feet away, blood dripping from his mouth and eyes wide opened.

Dead.

Darius's breath caught in his throat at the sight, feeling as if a part of him had died, too.

But he had no time to process it; he heard a shuffling, and he looked over to see Drok scrambling to his feet and charging. Drok let out a guttural scream as he landed on top of Darius, pinning him down, trying to choke him to death.

Darius felt his strong hands around his throat, slamming his head into the dirt, and he felt himself losing air. He was amazed that Drok could still have so much energy left, and still have so much hatred reserved for him.

Darius managed to reach up and grab his wrists, and then finally to spin on top of him and pin him down. Drok, though, rolled again, and pinned Darius down.

Back and forth they rolled, wrestling, each covered in dirt and blood, each with no energy left, except energy enough to kill each other. They were each beyond exhausted, and they each knew the elephant was bearing down on them again—and yet each cared for nothing but killing each other.

The elephant thundered and the ground shook as Darius felt the beast approaching. He knew he was but a moment away from death, unable to untangle himself from Drok—and he accepted it.

And then Drok, his palms slick with sweat, momentarily lost his grip on Darius and slipped; as he did, Darius took advantage, grabbed Drok, rolled, and with one last heave, he managed to throw him.

Drok landed a few feet away, to his side—and right in the path of the charging elephant. The elephant's huge foot came down and landed on Drok, crushing him to death. The last thing Darius saw was Drok raising his hands in protest, his screams muffled, as the elephant flattened him.

The crowd roared as the elephant ran past, and Darius, breathing hard, covered in wounds, amazed he was alive, slowly gained his feet. Still chained to the others, he could not run. And as the elephant circled and came back, Darius knew he was facing his final death charge.

Suddenly, Darius heard the sound of a small iron gate opening, followed by the barking of a wild dog. The crowd shouted in surprise, and Darius turned and was amazed to see a wild dog enter the arena, racing across it, charging for him. He was even more amazed to realize he recognized it: it was his dog. Dray.

Darius's heart lifted to see his dear friend alive again, as baffled as he was. He realized at once that someone must have found him, must have set him loose here when Darius needed him. Someone in the Empire was looking out for him. But who?

As Dray neared, Darius spotted a sole weapon tied about his neck, and as the dog reached him, he reached down and snatched it and realized what it was: his old, beloved sling, its leather grip well-worn, fitting perfectly in his hand. Tied to it was his canvas pouch, filled with smooth stones.

Darius wanted to hug Dray—but there was no time for a reunion. The elephant was bearing down on them, and Dray suddenly charged, sprinting out across the arena, fearlessly, to meet the elephant.

The crowd went wild at the sight, this small dog barking and attacking an elephant. The elephant, though, was enraged, and charged with fury for Dray.

Dray, much smaller and quicker, waited until the last moment, then turned away, leading the elephant away from Darius, clearly trying to save his master. It worked. The elephant changed course, chasing after Dray instead—no matter how much its rider tried to direct it otherwise.

Darius saw his moment of opportunity. He placed a perfectly round rock in the slingshot reached back, and as the elephant turned, exposing the soldier's side, about thirty feet away, he hurled.

Darius watched the rock go flying through the air, praying his aim was still true.

Darius breathed a sigh of relief to see the rock hit the soldier in his temple, a distinctive clang ringing out as it hit his helmet. Darius watched the rider go tumbling down off the elephant's back and landing on his neck, breaking it with a sickening crack.

He lay there on the arena floor, dead.

The crowd roared in shock.

The elephant, masterless, suddenly turned away from chasing Dray. Directionless, enraged, it instead turned right for the rows of spectators. It ran right for the arena walls, built low to the ground, jumped up onto the crowds, trumpeting in fury.

The citizens could not get out of the way fast enough, and screams arose as it trampled dozens at a time. Chaos ensued as people ran in every direction, trying to get to higher rows. The elephant stomped them mercilessly, and dozens of bodies fell into the arena, dead.

The elephant, finally having enough, turned and set its sights back on Darius. For some reason, it bore down right for him, charging with fury, still wanting him dead.

Dray ran forward, nipping at its heels, trying to make it turn

away—but this time it would not be dissuaded. It kept charging right for Darius, like death itself bearing down on him.

Darius, heart pounding, placed another rock, took aim, closed his eyes, and prayed to God. He knew the shot would have to be perfect.

Please, God. If I am deserving of anything in my lifetime, allow me to make this shot. Just one more shot. Allow me to die a victor.

Darius opened his eyes and the world slowed as he saw the elephant coming at him in slow motion. He leaned back, and with all he had, he hurled.

Darius watched as the single stone sailed through the sky, seeming to go slower than anything he had thrown his life. And then, a moment later, he watched in disbelief as the stone entered the elephant's eye.

The elephant shrieked as the stone lodged itself, deeper and deeper, driving all the way back to its brain. It kept charging, and for a moment, Darius wondered if it would fall.

Then, suddenly, finally, it stumbled and fell.

It fell head over heels, coming at him, and Darius ducked, bracing himself, expecting to die.

But somehow, it tumbled and rolled right over him, airborne just enough to miss him as it skirted over his head.

It landed behind him, on its back.

Dead.

For a moment, the arena was silent, all frozen in shock.

And then, suddenly, there came a wild cheer.

Darius was the last man standing.

Somehow, despite all odds, he had won.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Thorgrin flew through the air at full speed, his head racing through the clouds, not understanding what was happening. He looked down and realized he was riding on the back of a dragon, and was elated to see it was his old friend, Mycoples. He did not understand how she got here—or how she was even alive. As he flew on her back, racing through the skies, he felt alive again.

"Mycoples!" he called out, leaning down to hug her. "My old friend. How did you return to me?"

She purred, arched her neck, and raced faster, and Thor wondered where she was going. He did not care—as long as he was riding her, all felt right in the world again.

Thor suddenly heard a baby cry, and he looked down and was shocked to see, below, in Mycoples's claws, Guwayne. She held him gingerly, wrapped up in her talons, and as he cried he opened his eyes and Thor saw they were piercing blue. Thor felt overwhelmed by his connection to his son.

"Guwayne!" he called out.

Mycoples suddenly dipped down, beneath the clouds, lower and lower, and as she did, Thor saw looming beneath them the great expanse of ocean. A series of rocky cliffs, formations of rock, jutted up in the water, spread out from each other, dotting the ocean like great jagged boulders dropped down from the sky, like steppingstones to another world, shining beneath the light of a sole sun. The skies turned dark, despite the sun, and as they dove closer, Thorgrin sensed somehow that this had become the Isle of Light. Ragon's isle.

Thor heard Guwayne scream and he looked down and his heart fell to see that Mycoples had released his baby. Guwayne dropped from her talons and Thor watched, horrified, as he fell through the air, soaring right for the Isle of Light.

"GUWAYNE!" Thor shrieked.

Thor woke screaming. He looked everywhere in the blackness, sunlight streaming in through narrow slats, and wondered where he was. A cold sweat ran down the back of his neck as he sat up, rubbing his eyes.

It had felt so real. It took him several moments, breathing hard in the blackness, to realize it had just been a dream. An endless nightmare. He looked everywhere for Guwayne and realized he was not here, and felt a sense of relief. At least he had not fallen through the sky.

Yet, still, it nagged at him, as it had felt like more than a dream: it had felt like a message. But what? What were his dreams trying to

tell him?

"Thorgrin?" came a voice.

Thor looked over and saw in the blackness, on the far side of the hold, was Angel, staring back. Thor realized he was on the ship, beneath the deck, as Angel came over to him and placed a wet compress on his forehead.

"You were dreaming," she said. "You were talking in your sleep. Something about Guwayne and a dragon."

"Angel," Thor said, giving her a hug, getting his bearings, remembering. "Where are we?"

He looked over and saw that dawn was breaking, and realized he had slept the whole night—for the first time in he did not know how long.

"We've been sailing all night," she said. "I hear a great deal of commotion up above. I think we're nearing the entrance to the Empire."

Thor, remembering, jumped up immediately and raced across the hold, throwing open the wooden latch and hurrying up the steps two at a time—Angel right behind him.

Thor emerged into a beautiful sunrise, the golden suns washing over everything with a soft muted orange, and as he came up, he saw Reece, Selese, Elden, Indra, O'Connor, and Matus standing at the bow. They sailed alongside Erec and Alistair's ships, and Thor saw his sister and brother-in-law standing alert at the bow, too, along with Strom and all their men. They were all transfixed, looking straight ahead, and Thor turned to look, too.

Land. It took Thor's breath away to see it, after all this time, and his heart soared with relief. It was a land unlike any he had ever seen, and immediately he knew they had reached the Empire's shores.

Thor felt their boat slowing, the tides changing beneath them, and he looked out to see the ocean blending its way into the mouth of a river. The river, he saw, snaked its way and disappeared into the horizon.

"The River Volusia!" Erec called out, as Thor walked to the bow. "It flows all the way through the heart of the Empire. It will take us all the way north, to the city of Volusia."

Thor paused, looking out at the Empire, knowing that Gwen, the love of his life, was out there somewhere, and needed him. On the one hand, his heart beat with anticipation to see her again; yet on the other hand, he felt overwhelmed with guilt: how could he face her without Guwayne?

There came a distance screech, high in the air, and Thor turned and watched the skies, searching, remembering his dream. It was no ordinary screech. It was the screech of a dragon—and the second it

rang out, he knew it was meant only for him.

Sure enough, there emerged from the skies a lone dragon, circling high above, and Thor's heart lifted to see it was Lycoples. It was uncanny to see her now, at all times, here at this crossroads, when he was unsure what to do—and after such a vivid dream. It felt as if his dream had become reality.

All the men on the ships stopped and looked up in terror, as Lycoples swooped down for them.

"A dragon!" one of Erec's men called out. All the men cowered, dropped down to the deck, terrified—all except for Thor and Angel. Thor alone stood his ground, knowing there was nothing to fear, and Angel, fearless and mesmerized, stood beside him.

Lycoples dove down right for him and then, at the last second, she screeched and flapped her wings and lifted up, barely missing him.

She did it a second time, then a third, until Thor knew there was no mistaking it: she was trying to give him a message.

Lycoples then turned and flew off into the horizon, in the opposite direction, away from land, away from the Empire, and back over the open seas. Thor watched her go, watched her disappear, and he knew. He just *knew*.

She wanted him to follow.

Then, suddenly, in a rush, Thor was filled with clarity. Thor felt certain, more certain than he'd ever felt in his life, what it all meant. The mystery unraveled all at once.

Lycoples wanted to lead him back, back to the Isle of Light, because on it, there awaited someone very precious to him.

Guwayne.

Thor hated himself at that moment. How could he have been so stupid not to see it all this time? All this time, Guwayne had been right in front of them, right before his eyes, and he'd sailed away.

"Turn our ship around!" Thorgrin commanded.

They all looked at him as if he'd gone mad.

"Are you mad?" Erec called out. "The Empire lies before us, not behind us!"

Thor went to the rail and smiled back.

"You don't understand," he called back. "My quest lies behind us—not before us. Guwayne! He lives! Lycoples is leading me to him!"

They all stared back, shocked.

"I cannot return to Gwendolyn without him," Thor called out. "You go ahead. Go to Volusia, find her. Tell her I will follow soon—with our baby. Go now, my friends!"

Alistair and Erec clearly saw the look in Thor's eyes, saw his determination, and they nodded back in understanding. They sailed

their ships closer, so close that Thor could reach out and clasp Erec's forearm, and reach over and hug his sister.

"Until we meet again, my brother," Erec said.

"I love you, brother," Alistair said.

"And I you, my sister," he replied.

Thor allowed the seas to separate their ships, until they drifted further and further apart. His men, Angel ordering them, hurried to take up the sails, to turn the ship, all of them eager to follow Lycoples's trail.

Thor turned and faced the open seas himself, and for the first time since he had begun this quest, he felt certain.

And this time, he would stop at nothing—absolutely nothing—until he got his son back.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Ragon stood at the far end of the Isle of Light, holding Guwayne, and staring into the tall crystal spike that rose from the ground. It rose ten feet, its jagged points reaching up to the sky like something prehistoric, and as Ragon stared into it, it glowed different colors.

The shaft of Asus. It was the one place that Ragon could always come for clarity in times of confusion. Whenever his vision failed him, which was rare, he could come here and peer into what would be. It was a privilege he did not wish to abuse, since he knew his opportunities to peer into the crystal were limited. But now, in this current crisis, he felt obliged to.

Ragon searched the crystal, desperately needing clarity, needing to know why his vision had failed him, to understand what was happening. A foreboding was rising deep inside him, and he did not like how it felt.

Ragon closed his eyes and chanted softly, waiting for the spirit to come to him.

Ookythroota, Ookythroota, Ookythroota…

Guwayne cried softly as he chanted, and Ragon rocked him, chanting over and over, louder and louder, until he finally felt the familiar sensation between his eyes.

Ragon opened his eyes and stared into the crystal shaft, and as he did, he saw it glowing yellow and orange and white—until finally, the vision came to him.

Ragon saw, unfolding before him, a prophecy he did not understand. He saw a world covered in black, the gates of hell open, and a million evil creatures ransacking the world. He saw his very own island, the Isle of Light, this island which had always been impregnable, which had sat here for centuries, consumed in flames. He saw himself being attacked by an army of undead creatures.

Ragon wanted to look away but forced himself not to. He wished he hadn't, as a cold dread overcame him. He saw Guwayne surrounded by darkness, snatched from his arms. He clutched him tight as he watched him become lost in the grips of a power greater than any he'd ever seen.

Ragon could stand it no more. He forced himself to look away, breathing hard, his heart pounding, and he looked down at Guwayne, who lay in his arms, now silent. Ragon was covered in a cold sweat, and he did not understand any of it; it had been the most terrifying vision of his life.

Ragon hurried from the shaft and crossed his isle, running, taking long, sorcerer strides, each stride bigger than the next, ten feet, then a

hundred feet, then two hundred, leaping like a gazelle across this isle he knew so well—until finally he reached the other side.

He stood there, at the opposite end, at this place he saw in his visions and he watched the skies, staring into the horizon. It was from here, the crystal had shown him, that he would be attacked.

Ragon stared and stared into the dark clouds gathering on the horizon, and yet he saw nothing. He wondered if it had all been an illusion. After all, how could he, Ragon, be attacked? How could Guwayne, the most powerful child on earth, be taken away from him? And yet, he had to admit, he felt some darkness coming himself.

He stood there, watching the skies, pondering his fate, and he did not know how much time had passed when slowly, his worst fears were confirmed. On the horizon there began to emerge a plague of blackness, an army of demons and other creatures flying through the air, heading right for his island. He knew at once whose handiwork this was, and which dark demon lord was behind it.

They were descending lower and lower, and he could sense right away that it was all true. The prophecies he had seen were true. His isle would be destroyed. Guwayne would be taken from him. He would be killed. The world would descend into blackness. And there was not a thing he could do.

He clutched Guwayne, holding onto him with all he had, wanting to hold him just a few seconds longer before he was lost to him forever. But destiny was knocking. And he knew that nothing he, or anyone else could do, would change it.

He would die here today, he felt certain of that—but he would not go down without a fight. He took a deep breath, held Guwayne close, held out his staff—and prepared for war.

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About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling author of THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, a young adult series comprising eleven books (and counting); the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and the #1 bestselling epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising fifteen books (and counting).

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